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BULLET HEAD, THE COLORADO BRAVO;

Or, THE PRISONERS OF THE
DEATH-VAULT.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMBRERO," "LADY JAGUAR," "THE SCORPION BROTHERS," "CANYON DAVE," ETC., ETC.



A MOMENT'S PAUSE AND THE TERRIBLE TORRENT OF WATER STRUCK THE TREE. THE BRAVO STOOD ABOVE THEM, SARDONICALLY LOOKING ON.

Bullet Head,

THE COLORADO BRAVO;

OR,

The Prisoners of the Death-Vault.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "LONG-HAIRED MAX," "CACTUS JACK," "BARRANCA BILL," "THE SCORPION BROTHERS," "DON SOMBRERO," "CANYON DAVE," "BUCKSHOT BEN," "LADY JAGUAR," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BURIED ALIVE.

RED BULLET BAR was, in 1881, one of the most thriving towns of Colorado, some people even prophesying that it would within two years eclipse Leadville. That it did not do so proves them poor prophets, but does not alter the fact that gold was there quite plentifully.

Other industries flourished also, and few men looked better satisfied just then than the carpenters who were fast making the infant city expand.

Albert Leverett, who was one of the latter class, was one evening sitting in the doorway of his cabin, serenely smoking, when he saw a man whose approach caused him some interest, knowing, as he did, that he was Edmund Bartlett, a mine-owner, and supposed to be the richest man at Red Bullet Bar.

Leverett did not expect to receive so much as a nod, but the rich man walked directly to his side.

"Good-evening, sir. Your name, I believe, is Leverett?"

Bartlett spoke somewhat abruptly, but his manner was pleasant and friendly.

"Such is my name, sir," answered the younger man, politely, but with a degree of independence born of the fact that men of his craft were not ciphers in the town just then.

"And a carpenter, by trade?"

"Yes, sir."

"You also know something of the mason's trade?"

Again Leverett assented, remembering vaguely that the rich man had stood for several minutes and watched him as he put together the chimney of a house on the lower street!

"I have some work at my house which I wish done. One man is all I care to employ, and he must be both a carpenter and a mason. The work will employ him for a week, and I will pay the highest price."

It was a chance Leverett did not refuse, for, besides the immediate pay, the work might serve to fix him in the good-will of the mine-owner.

Thus began the acquaintanceship of the two men, and that evening the carpenter called on his employer and heard what he wished done.

"I wish to have an additional cellar," Bartlett explained, "in which I can keep such articles as I wish to handle myself, exclusively. My Chinese servants are as honest as the race runs, but they have a weakness for drinking my wine, and so forth. The second cellar, which must be arranged so that I alone can enter it, will be my store-room for valuables of all kinds. You have probably been in Red Bullet Bar long enough to know that we are seriously troubled by the lawless ways of the road-agents led by Bullet Head, the Bravo, as he is called."

"I have heard them spoken of," the carpenter replied.

"Exactly. Well, it has occurred to me that this redoubtable robber may some day make a descent on my house, because of the fact that it is of considerable size. Thinking thus, I have resolved to have a secret cellar, or vault, and there hide my valuables. Having done this, I can rest in the knowledge that I shall not be left a beggar, even though my house be burned over me by Bullet Head."

The precaution seemed a wise one, and Albert said as much, and as Mr. Bartlett offered good pay he readily agreed to do the work. He really was as much of a mason as a carpenter, and all would undoubtedly go smoothly.

The mine-owner described how he wished the vault constructed. The bottom was to be of the hardest cement and six inches in thickness, and the sides of heavy stone blocks, well cemented, and the whole covered with well-riveted sheet-iron.

Leverett was somewhat surprised at the extraordinary strength required. To him, it seemed unnecessary, since Mr. Bartlett intended the contrivance to be a secret one rather than a proof against burglars, and this plan reminded him of an old-fashioned safe, but he recognized the rich man's right to have everything to suit himself.

Another hobby of the case was that Leverett should not so much as whisper to any outsider what was being done. It was enough for them that Bartlett was making repairs on his house.

The next day he went to the place to begin work.

The original cellar of the house was but a

small affair, occupying but about one-third of the space covered over by the building, and the vault was to have the remaining room, but, at the same time, be entirely distinct from the cellar proper.

Bartlett conducted his workman to the place, and the latter saw what had before been explained to him; the necessary excavation had already been made by Bartlett's Chinamen and the unnecessary earth taken away, while a quantity of stone blocks lay scattered around, ready for his hand.

"How long will you be occupied in laying them?" the mine-owner asked, pointing to the blocks.

"Two days, at the least, for the beginning will be somewhat difficult."

"Of course. Well, that is what I calculated, and you can proceed and lay at your own speed, taking care only that all shall be strong. The stone blocks, you see, are well formed, having been worked down by my Chinamen under my directions. By the time they are in place, others shall be ready."

Leverett went to work. He was not one to slight or delay a job, and he intended to please his employer in every way. Having measured the room and done a little calculating, he set the first stone, and the vault began to have an existence.

With the placing of that stone began one branch of a drama which was to change the entire life current of several people, some of whom were hundreds of miles away.

Bartlett remained where he was for an hour and then went up to the room above, ascending by the ladder down which they had come.

The carpenter-mason was alone, but he was far from being disturbed thereby. The building of a cellar was no new work to him, and the precautions for strength adopted by his employer occasioned but a passing thought. In his opinion, the man who pays for work has the privilege of having it done to suit himself.

So Albert worked on in a matter-of-fact way. He laid the blocks of stone, measured and cemented, and showed commendable skill in all he did. Two lanterns, with strong reflectors, suspended from the roof, aided him to see without difficulty.

Another hour passed, and he found it necessary to have some trifling article he had forgotten. He ascended the ladder, to find some Chinese laborer and send him to the store.

We say he ascended the ladder. Really, he went only to within three feet of the top, when he paused suddenly at finding himself face to face with a man.

He had never seen so peculiar a human being before.

Sitting flat on the floor, his legs curled up beneath him, the unknown revealed a body which was simply astonishing in its breadth of shoulders and chest, and its general muscular development.

Beyond a doubt, great strength existed there, but its appearance approached deformity.

Supported on a thick, muscular neck was a huge, round head, which was not less promising in its indication of intelligence than the gross, coarse face below. Jet-black hair and a corresponding beard hemmed in the face, and, both being comparatively short, they reminded one of the stubble left on a grain-field after the passage of the reaper, even as the huge ears somehow recalled the sails of a boat moving before a strong wind.

Taken as a whole, this creature was so strange, so unexpected, hideous and animal-looking, that Albert instinctively paused.

The creature's eyes met his—in contrast to his face they were keen and penetrating, if not naturally intelligent—and then he burst into a laugh, or what was doubtless meant for one. It had, however, but little human sound.

Albert did not rally easily. He did not know whether to treat this creature like a human being, a watch-dog or a parrot, and it was with a good deal of confusion that he finally spoke.

"I beg your pardon, but I—I—"

Not knowing what to say, he paused entirely.

The creature laughed again, and allowed his gaze to fall toward the vault in such a way that it could not be doubted but that he had been watching the mason; then, raising his eyes and his hands at the same time, he waved the latter in the air in a series of gestures which conveyed nothing to Albert's mind.

Feeling like one in a nightmare, the young man leaped to the floor above, brushed past the unknown, and sought the room where he expected to find the Chinaman.

He was so far successful that he found one, to whom he delivered his directions. He had just finished, when a shuffling sound behind him caused him to turn, and he saw that the nameless creature had followed him.

Its mode of traveling was peculiar—walking, as it did, in the position one naturally assumes when sitting on a low stool, and at the same time touching his hands like additional legs or a pair of crutches.

Once more the carpenter looked in bewilderment. He understood that the creature's legs were not strong enough to support his massive body in a natural position, and that his arms

were needed for support, but all this added to the strangeness hovering about him.

"In Heaven's name," Albert instinctively exclaimed, turning to the Chinaman, "what do you call this thing?"

Wing Charlie shook his head.

"Him welly unlucky," he said gravely. "Git burtee some tlime welly bad; all gone here, eb-ber since."

He touched his head, and then added:

"Dat Foolish Joe!"

Albert began to see more clearly.

"Does he understand what we say?" he asked.

"Mind all gonee. Him knowee nuffin', hear nuffin'—only see, eat, dlink."

The carpenter was about to inquire why such an object was kept in Bartlett's house, but second thought convinced him that it was none of his business and he returned to his work.

Five minutes later, glancing to the top of the ladder, he saw the idiot looking down and watching him at his work. That this was a critical survey did not occur to Albert, for not only was the creature's face wholly without expression, but in his way Wing Charlie had said that he was utterly without sense. Such being the case, he was, of course, watching with childish curiosity.

The building of the vault went on steadily. During the day the young man worked faithfully, and at night went to his own cabin. He had never had a more pleasant employer. Mr. Bartlett was a wealthy and highly-educated man, and at all times an air of conscious power hung about him, but Albert had no fault to find.

Day by day, as he worked, the idiot sat cross-legged on the floor above and watched him. The closely-cemented wall seemed to interest him, the clang of the hammer when the sheet-iron was riveted brought forth more than one chuckle, and the solid flooring afterward added seemed in some way pleasing to the darkened mind.

If Foolish Joe had been superintendent of the work he would not have paid closer attention.

When he and Bartlett chanced to meet, neither so much as looked at the other, but, once, the mine-owner explained how they chanced to be together. The idiot was deformed and his lower limbs almost useless, but he could swim like a fish. Once, off the coast of California, Bartlett would have drowned had not Joe come to his aid. For that service he was duly grateful and finding that the idiot was a burden on an old mother who was very poor, he had taken charge of him and kept him about the house as he would a dog.

Such was the history of Foolish Joe.

In the mean while, the iron vault progressed favorably, and one evening Albert Leverett went to his employer and said:

"The work is done!"

And so it was. Roof, walls and floor were alike complete, and the manufacturer, standing erect in the place, had looked it over and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ten men, empty-handed, could not make a breach here; it is literally a dungeon. Somehow, I am reminded of that king of the Dark Ages—what was his name?—who had a similar place constructed for entombing his political foes and then began the work by shutting up his mason that he might tell no tales. Luckily, Bartlett is not of that caliber, while, so far as strength goes, he can feel assured that this place will resist the attacks of all robbers, even that of the noted road-agent, Bullet Head, the Bravo."

His work done, the young man went to Bartlett and made the announcement before record.

Ed. The rich man surveyed it critically.

"There is yet a little dampness about the ceiling of the floor," he said.

"A trifle only, and that is caused by the fact that, being laid on the ground, it dries more slowly than it would otherwise do. At the end of a week, it will be practically a solid rock. An ordinary chisel and hammer could not make a hole through it."

"Will you, then, at the end of another week, come here with a quantity of white paint, of some sort, and cover the whole interior? I would have it done now, but the smell of paint is offensive and the weather too cold to make open windows agreeable."

Albert readily agreed and then returned to his own cabin. The following morning he went to work on another job.

Before the end of the week something occurred which materially changed Albert's plans. He was waited upon by an old gentleman who said that he lived at Brickyard Bend, a town twenty miles north, and so good a business chance offered him that he decided to leave Red Bullet Bar and so announced to his friends.

It was the evening before his intended departure that he went again to Bartlett's house, prepared to paint the interior of the vault.

"All is ready for you," said the rich man, pleasantly. "You will find all as you left it. Return to me when you are through, please."

Albert went to the entrance to the vault. On his way he passed Foolish Joe, but he had before seen that kind speeches were thrown away upon him and he vouchsafed no more than a

glance, though the idiot shuffled after him and took his old position at the top of the ladder.

The young man went about his painting at once. It was to be his last job in Red Bullet Bar and he was anxious to finish it. When finished, he would be free to prepare for his journey.

One of the walls was half painted when something—he could not tell what—caused him to turn and direct his gaze toward the ladder-opening.

What he saw gave him a little start. The ladder had silently and entirely disappeared, having been drawn up, of course, and the only thing to relieve the mass of masonry was a dark, hideous face which appeared at the little opening—the face of Foolish Joe.

The idiot broke into a loud chuckle, and for the first time there was something like a look of intelligence on his face.

"Here, you, what have you done with that ladder?" Albert threateningly demanded. "Drop it down here at once!"

The chuckle increased to a laugh, and though it was harsh and unnatural of sound, Albert could not doubt but that Joe believed he was playing some rare trick.

On his own part he could not appreciate it, and he had begun another demand when the idiot disappeared, and, a moment later, a heavy clang was followed by a cloud of dust as the iron plate which formed its door fell into place.

Foolish Joe had literally buried the carpenter alive!

The latter was startled for a moment, and then he laughed quite naturally.

"That's a new freak for Joe, but it will all end well. Bartlett will soon discover what is wrong and let me out. In the mean while, I'll finish my work."

He did this faithfully, painting the whole interior of the vault, but though he often glanced at the door in the roof, it had not been opened when he finished. The fact annoyed him, for as it was too high for his reach he must rely on others to help him out.

He shouted several times, hoping to see Bartlett or the Chinamen appear, but all remained silent above; repeated shouts failed to bring any one to his aid.

Hours passed. Albert had shouted until he was hoarse, but all in vain. He had grown very angry, knowing it was time for him to start for Brickyard Bend, but the feeling finally gave place to a grave fear.

Remembering the secret circumstances under which the vault was built, he really began to fear he was intentionally buried alive!

CHAPTER II.

KIDNAPPED.

THE stage rolled on into Red Bullet Bar, and the passengers, who were three in number, lost no time in alighting. Mose Kidder's hotel looked decidedly inviting after a ten-mile rattle over Pickax Ridge.

They entered, and, one after another, wrote their names on the register Mr. Kidder produced.

"I'm glad to see you got through unmolested by Bullet Head, gentlemen," he said, rubbing his hands.

"Bullet Head? And who is he?" asked one, a man with a big black beard, his curiosity apparently excited by the oddity of the name.

"Bless your heart! you must be new in this region or you would know without asking. He's a road-agent, he is, and the worst in Colorado. If he didn't light on your stage to-day, 'twas because he was going through somebody somewhere else."

The questioner laughed.

"I'm sorry it happened that way," he said, tersely.

A second passenger held up both hands in horror.

"Don't say that!" he implored. "I've heard of Bullet Head, and he's a man to be feared, dreaded, loathed."

"Yet," cried he of the black beard, in a more elevated voice, "I don't fear him a particle. I am not a fighting man, and I don't hanker for trouble, but I would really like to see this Bullet Head. If I had him here I would pull his nose for him!"

The third passenger held out his hand quickly.

"Such sentiments do you honor, sir. I have before said that I am a preacher of the Gospel, and I am truly averse to shedding blood; but I think we ought to defy and exterminate these frightful road-agents."

"Perhaps you will take the job," said the man who had no desire to meet Bullet Head, and there was a good deal of sarcasm in his voice.

"I will do my part," said the minister, soberly.

"He is a hard fighter," added Kidder. "He has lorded it over this region for some time, and when he drops on a stage and says, 'Hands up!' nobody kicks. Why, only last week he took in five pilgrims on the road with only one man to back him."

"Bah!" cried he of the black beard, "they were calves. Why didn't they try lead on the

fellow? He is probably a very ordinary rascal and a coward at heart. You see my name on the register—Abram Belford—and I hereby announce that if I see this Bullet Head while I am near this town I lead him captive to your sheriff."

A call to supper ended the conversation and the subject seemed forgotten. After all, it was but a bar-room talk, and probably as idle as such talks usually are. Man seldom takes wisdom into such places.

Night fell over the village, work ceased in mine and on growing building, and the citizens of the place proceeded to enjoy themselves as best they could. There was on this occasion nothing to occupy the tongues of the people on any one topic. A few expressed surprise that Bullet Head and his band had not been heard from for three days, but it was not through regret they mentioned the fact.

The outlaw was well-known and universally feared all around Red Bullet Bar. True, there were men who would gladly have pitted themselves against him in equal fight, but such chances were never given. When Bullet Head appeared it was at the head of his band of road-agents, and under circumstances tremendously in his favor.

He had become a power in that immediate vicinity and was credited with being cunning, remorseless, immensely rich and, some even asserted, in direct communication with that individual supposed to watch over and aid evildoers.

Of the three passengers before noticed, only one mixed with the crowd in Kidder's saloon. Mr. Belford and the minister had retired to a private room, at the latter's suggestion, and were engaged in conversation.

If Belford had been more interested in what was occurring around him he might have been driven, as time passed on, to doubt if his companion was really what he seemed, for his language was anything but befitting his self-claimed office. In fact, one would have almost said he was trying to draw some comment from Belford, but the latter gave every evidence of being in mind miles away from his body.

The minister looked annoyed and finally spoke abruptly:

"May I ask of what you are thinking?"

Belford did not start, and a dim smile crossed his face as he looked at his questioner.

"It will do no harm to ask," he coolly said, "but I must decline to answer. That covers the whole ground, and I need only add that I do not intend any breach of courtesy."

"Let me change the subject," said the minister, abruptly. "I believe you expressed a wish to pull the nose of Bullet Head, the road-agent?"

"Possibly I did," said Belford, carelessly. "I don't remember, positively."

"Do you recede from your position?"

"Not at all," was the curt reply. "If I agreed to pull the nose of Bullet Head, at sight, I thank you for reminding me of the fact. I shall not fail to keep my word."

"Then, proceed with your work at once. I am Bullet Head!"

The words were quietly spoken, and as Belford's face did not change color it was fair to suppose that he did not believe the statement. He drew a cigar from his pocket and severed the end with his knife.

"You look like it," he tersely said.

His companion arose, cast off his cloak, a wig and false beard, and appeared truly metamorphosed. By the change ten years seemed removed from his age and his character was not less changed.

He was now seen to be a stoutly-built man of middle-age, while the unusual development of chest and arms gave him a peculiarly round, barrel-like appearance which also extended to his head.

This latter organ was nearly as round as a ball, so round, in fact, that Belford could no longer doubt that the notorious "Bullet Head" sat beside him. The face expressed cunning, resolution and a low and rather brutish nature, but there was nothing particularly villainous about it.

Belford laughed lightly.

"So I was speaking in the hearing of Bullet Head himself, when I made my statement."

"Yes, and you expressed the opinion that I was a coward," was the sharp reply.

"I remember."

"Well," said the outlaw, after a pause, during which he seemed waiting for Belford to make clear his position, "it is now time for you to make good your boast. You have said you will pull my nose; now, let me see you do it!"

"Come around the table, where I can reach you, and you shall be accommodated," was the lazy reply.

The outlaw looked surprised and angry. He was accustomed to see men tremble and turn pale before him or else set their teeth and dare all, but Belford was as cool and indifferent as though he had been faring a child. All this annoyed Bullet Head, who liked to be feared and respected, and he drew his revolver with a jerk and leveled it at his companion.

"You will come to me!" he declared, and the

glitter of the revolver was answered by the glitter of his eyes.

"I see you have the persuaders, and I won't argue the case," replied Belford, yawning. "But, allow me to ask what you will do in case I don't obey?"

"I'll blow out your brains!"

The threatened man coolly lit his cigar and, leaning back in his chair, began to smoke with evident enjoyment.

"I reckon, then, you'll have to blaze away!" he added.

The man with the revolver looked angry, puzzled and then irresolute, by turns.

"I reckon you doubt my identity," he said, slowly; "that you don't believe I am the so-called Bullet Head."

"On the contrary, I believe every word of it. Your looks carry out the statement. Beyond a doubt, you are the celebrated knight of the road."

"You believe this, and at the same time defy me?"

"Hardly. I am not sufficiently interested to defy you. If you want to play for the dance, go right on and I won't meddle. Blow out my brains, if 'twill amuse you!"

Belford yawned again, smoked slowly and, with half-closed eyes, seemed wholly at his ease.

Bullet Head had been a good deal puzzled, but his face suddenly cleared.

"I see how it is," he said. "You haven't had a smooth road in life, your existence is of no value to you, and you had just as soon die as not."

"On the contrary, I want to live, badly."

The outlaw struck his clinched fist on the table.

"And yet you practically dare me to fire?"

"Yes."

Bullet Head looked very much surprised; so much surprised that several seconds passed in silence. Then Belford aroused, knocked the ashes from his cigar and calmly added:

"I'll explain. Life, as I have said, is of value to me; but it is a bauble I don't expect to hang onto a great while, anyhow. I came to Red Bullet Bar expecting to die here. Such being the case, what does it matter whether your hand, or that of some other person, sends me over the divide?"

The outlaw thrust his revolver back in his belt.

"What the dickens are you driving at?" he demanded.

"The truth," was the indifferent answer.

"You came to Red Bullet Bar expecting to be killed?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"My enemies."

"My way is to kill, rather than be killed."

"Unfortunately, they are more powerful than I."

"Then why come at all?"

"Because they desired it."

Bullet Head sat in irresolution, wholly at a loss to understand his companion. Was he telling the truth, lying deliberately, or insane? He certainly did not look to be the latter, and his manner was perfectly frank.

"You're a fool to be killed in this fashion," he finally said, bluntly. "Why, if I just hankered to die, I wouldn't allow an enemy to wind up my career if I could help it. I believe in fighting to the last. Swear to me that you are telling the truth, that there is no trap, or treachery, in this, and you can have Bullet Head and his gang at your back. I take to you and I'll help you. What do you say?"

For the first time Belford seemed to be interested; plainly, the road-agent's proposition had aroused him from his singular indifference.

"You'll shoulder an elephant if you take me up," he said, warily.

His companion smiled.

"If you doubt my courage, ask any one what my reputation is. Hard up, I came to Red Bullet Bar at a certain time and took to the road. I adopted the name of Captain Bullet, from that of the town, but people saw the shape of my upper story and called me Bullet Head, a name I did not decline. At my first exploit they turned out to hunt me, bent on vengeance, but at the present day they are only too glad to let me and my party alone. I tell you, you cannot find another protector as strong as I am. Confide in me; tell me your story; and after that it will be strange if we don't join hands. What say?"

"By Jupiter! I'll do it!" Belford declared, tossing his cigar away.

It was three hours later, that same night, that four men approached the house of Edmund Bartlett, moving very slowly on account of the heavy burden they bore. This burden, an observer might have seen, had the darkness been less, was the body, animate or otherwise, of a man.

A second glance would have shown that the four bearers were, without exception, Chinamen.

They reached the rear door of the mansion, and one of the party liberated a hand long enough to rap at the door. It was instantly

opened, and Mr. Bartlett, himself, became dimly visible, though no light was anywhere visible. The rich man breathed as though he had been making haste in some way, but that he expected this strange procession was proved by the way in which he stepped back for them to enter and then closed the door.

"Let us lose no more time," he hurriedly said, when this was accomplished. "He may be missed from the hotel and his absence inquired into. Follow me to the vault!"

Without waiting a reply he led the way and they soon stood over the place we have previously seen made by his orders. The Chinamen deposited their burden on the floor while they opened the mouth of the vault and it suddenly moved and made a gurgling sound, as though trying to speak through the impediment of a gag.

"Don't trouble yourself, Mr. Belford," said Bartlett, coldly. "I'll imagine you have spoken and let it go at that."

The prisoner could not answer, and his few awkward struggles were soon ended as the Chinamen lifted and coolly dropped him into the vault, indifferent to the fact that a considerable descent awaited him, and that the floor below was of rock-like hardness.

"Enough!" said Bartlett, exultantly. "The vault will now fulfill its mission and its two occupants will starve together—unless number two is already killed by the fall. Close the door and, from to-day, forget that it is here. Remember all directions I have given you and beware of telling tales. You may go!"

They had passed the door, and as he followed his tools through he locked it behind him. In his mind he had decided that that portion of his house should not again be opened for a year. By that time—

He shrugged his shoulders, put the key in his pocket and went to his room. On the table lay a wig and false beard which Kidder, the landlord, would probably have recognized as belonging to the third passenger of the coach—he who had expressed a fear of Bullet Head.

Bartlett took these articles and, going to the stove, thrust them inside and saw them fall to nothing in the grasp of the flames.

"So ends this little affair," he commented. "In the morning Kidder will be surprised to find that two of his lodgers have mysteriously disappeared, but I don't believe either of them will ever be heard of again. One has gone into this stove, and the other into the vault. Ha! ha! my good friend, Belford, little suspected the identity of his companion on the road."

Not much longer did the rich man remain astir but, seeking his bed, he was soon sleeping as peacefully as though the iron vault did not hold the evidence of a terrible double crime and—a mystery.

And in the morning no one appeared more innocent than he when he heard of the disappearances from Kidder's Hotel. The matter was not regarded as strange by any one. All three of the stage-passengers had vanished, and though Mr. Bartlett was wholly ignorant of the whereabouts of the gentleman who looked like a minister, it was very easy for the landlord to decide that the three had been in collusion in an infamous plot to cheat him of his dues.

Accepting this view, no one suspected foul play.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRISONERS OF THE VAULT.

BARTLETT had spoken truly when he said that the fall endured by his prisoner might have resulted fatally, for the distance was such that the chances were decidedly against him; but luck, or something else, was in his favor.

He struck squarely on his feet, and though he lost his balance, bound as he was, and fell to the floor, he was wholly uninjured and at once gained a sitting position. His jaws had been freed from the gag by the shock.

When he was thrown down he had believed he was to be thrown into an ordinary well, but he found himself in a place that was dry and where the darkness was by no means intense.

Indeed, there was a white glimmer on all sides and he was not long in discovering a man approaching him. Believing he was about to be attacked by an assassin, he first tried to burst his bonds and then, dropping flat on his back, held his feet in such a position that he could dash them against the stranger.

"Are you hurt?" the latter asked.

"No, I ain't hurt!" promptly returned the new-comer. "I'm well and sprightly."

"You are, I suppose, a prisoner, like myself."

"I'm one beyond question, but I can't answer for you."

"I'm no better," said the stranger, in a voice which so vibrated with anger that the bound man suddenly sat erect.

"Prove it by untying me," he said.

The order was promptly obeyed; a few touches of a pocket-knife severed his bonds and he arose. The two men stood face to face, looking at each other keenly.

"Who are you?" the last-comer tersely asked.

"My name is Albert Leverett, and I am a carpenter of Red Bullet Bar," was the reply.

"What are you doing here?" Leverett laughed bitterly.

"Waiting."

"For what?"

"The end. It looks as though it might be death, but who can tell? I see you are not more fortunate than myself, and I will confide in you. We are now in a vault built by my own hands. I have been here for two days, during which time I have exhausted all my ingenuity to get out. It is impossible, as I knew before I began the attempt, and it looks as though the only hope lies in death. When I was taken I had a small package of food and a flask of whisky in my pocket, but these are now gone. Henceforth, there is nothing to eat—unless you brought something."

He spoke longingly, but his companion shook his head.

"I haven't a crumb. But, see here—I am still in the dark. What sort of a place is this, anyway?"

Albert Leverett, for the prisoner was indeed he, told all he knew about the iron vault. As has been said, he had been in the place two days since he was trapped. The food he had gathered to sustain him on the way to Brickyard Bend had lasted until within a few hours, but it was at last gone, and he had nothing to quiet the pangs of hunger and thirst.

"I begin to see clearly," said the new-comer. "Bartlett is a villain of the first water, and has built this place as a dungeon, or a tomb, for those he hates. You, being the builder, was first doomed because you knew his secret. Now, none of the outside world know of this place, and we may starve and give no sign."

"Undoubtedly you are right," Albert said, gloomily.

"But I am not disposed to die like a rat in a trap. We must escape."

"Impossible!"

"How so?"

"No human being can get out of here without the best of tools to aid him."

"And we lack these tools?"

"I have only a pocket-knife. Here you see a paint-brush and a pail, but they are, of course, useless."

The stranger arose and made a survey of the vault. He had not been there long enough to lose courage, and had not Leverett himself been the constructor of the place he might have gained hope; but he knew the cement floor, six inches in thickness, would defy almost any effort, and the well-riveted sheet-iron walls, with the stone affair beyond, could only be passed by the best of tools.

The roof seemed too high to be thought of seriously.

"A fine tomb!" commented the stranger, sarcastically. "So the old reprobate said it was to hide his treasure from Bullet Head? Bah! I have seen the outlaw chief, and I tell you he ain't the worst man in Colorado. His name is against him, and his reputation, too; but he is the friend of the persecuted and innocent."

The stranger spoke earnestly; one would have said he owed some debt of gratitude to the road-agent chief.

"Do you live in Red Bullet Bar?" Leverett asked.

"No," answered the stranger, and for a moment he seemed disposed to end all confidence there; but rallying, he added: "I am a resident of Denver, and my name is Belford—Abram Belford."

"Have you any idea why you are seized by Bartlett?"

Belford looked annoyed by this questioning, but his pause was but momentary.

"I did not see the man except as he was escorting me in, after his Chinamen had kidnapped me, but I dare say he is some one I have known in the past, possibly under another name. I had a presentiment that Red Bullet Bar would bring me ill, and I should have kept away had it not been for— But, bah! why gossip? I repeat, we must get out!"

"But can it be done?"

"Curse it!" he exclaimed, "why did you build so well? What honest man ever wanted such a trap as this? Here we are, walled up alive, doomed to die and leave no sign to tell of our fate. Have you a mother, sister or lady-love?"

Leverett's face contracted with pain.

"Do not recall what I must lose!" he exclaimed.

"I only recall that for which we must labor," Belford coolly answered. "You must get out of here to see those for whom you care again; I must escape to—"

The man did not finish, but turning away, walked to the further side of the vault and then back.

"Perhaps you will tell me how we are to escape," Albert then said, somewhat bitterly.

"You should have left a loop-hole," said Belford.

"But I did not leave any," said the carpenter, almost defiantly.

The idea had occurred to him that this man who took his captivity so coolly might be a spy sent by Bartlett to see that all was indeed safe that the vault was incapable of being broken.

That he was wronged Belford we need scarcely state, nor will it trouble the reader to see that his present self-possessed mood was but in keeping with the spirit he showed when talking with Bullet Head at the hotel.

Practically considered, it remained a fact that they were prisoners of a man who intended they should die in the vault. Against the carpenter Bartlett had no ill-will, in one sense of the word, but he had no intention of having the world-at-large know he had such a place as the vault.

He had no fear that Leverett would be sought for by the villagers, for had not the young man announced that he was going to Brickyard Bend? The plotter had calculated every chance and left no weak places in his iniquitous web; Albert was doomed.

Why he hated Belford he could, himself, have best told. That his prisoner was ignorant of the complications which had brought him there we may well doubt, but in any case he was not a man to confide in others.

The following day, a little past noon, a man ascended the rough side of the mountain behind the village and, ultimately entering a well-concealed cave, was conducted by a gigantic negro to whom he made known his errand, to no less a person than Bullet Head, the road-agent chief.

We need scarcely say the cave was the outlaws' lair.

The man first-mentioned entered a sub-room, which was little more than a niche in the rocks, and stood before his chief.

Bullet Head was clad in a peculiar garb, which reminded one of a Turkish costume, and a mask covered his face. It was said that face had never been uncovered near Red Bullet Bar, but we have already seen one case where the rule was violated.

The robber started, and looked eagerly at his man.

"Well?" he questioned.

"I have just come from the village, and the landlord is cursing because all three of his guests disappeared last night. He says they went without paying their bills."

"Did he say the three had disappeared?"

"Yes, captain."

The outlaw leader was silent for a moment, and then he started half-way from his seat.

"Fool that I was!" he ejaculated, aloud;

"why did I not detect this?"

His question was an enigma to the messenger, while the black giant had not spoken an unnecessary word for years. He heard and gave no sign; listened, on such occasions, with a changeless face—seemed a statue, but was, in reality, a sleeping tiger whose life was devoted to Captain Bullet, as the chief was always scrupulously called among his men.

The latter recovered his coolness in a moment and, finding by questioning that there was nothing more to be learned, dismissed his man. Then he sunk back in his chair and relapsed into deep thought, while Goliath, the negro, went to a seat not far away.

Bullet Head was far from being at ease.

"The sword has fallen," he thought. "Belford is in the power of his enemies. They have taken him, dead or alive, and it will be a wonder if he is ever again seen. What have they done with him? It seems foolish to ask, when there are a thousand niches around Red Bullet Bar where his body could be placed, and lie until the blast of Gabriel's horn. Dead he undoubtedly is; the doom is fulfilled, and the drama ended. But, what shall I do about it?"

The question was so profound, and so hard to answer, that he arose and began pacing the room.

Situated as he was at the head of his band, he knew it would be dangerous for him to take a hand in the game. He would dare enemies who were numerous, powerful and vindictive. It would be far safer to keep aloof from the affair; and why should he espouse the quarrel of a man he had never seen until the previous night?

With Abram Belford buried and forgotten, there was peace for those who lived; those who tried to uncover his grave might find themselves victims of their own meddling disposition.

CHAPTER IV.

BULLET HEAD SEEKS LIGHT.

THE road-agent chief did not decide rashly; such a decision as he had to make was one which required time. Despite the position he held he was not bad-hearted, and he felt it his duty to solve the fate of the man he had met by chance, but with whom he had exchanged confidences.

He was well aware that his own safest course was to keep aloof from the whole affair and to let the name and memory of Abram Belford die out, but honor demanded an altogether different course.

"No!" he finally decided. "This man declared a respect and friendship for me, and I will not be cowardly enough to desert him now he is in trouble. The third passenger of the stage was he who calls himself Edmund Bartlett, and it is to him my friend owes his trouble. It is for me to avenge him, and this I will do in some

way. At the worst, I can repay him in kind by stealing the daughter he is said to love so well."

Important matters seemed upon the mind of the outlaw, for it was long before his meditative mood ended. At times he paced the room and then sat well-buried in his easy-chair, but in every way his manner betrayed the man who grasps and wrestles with matters of importance.

In point of fact, Bullet Head that day fought a great battle with himself. Every instinct of his nature impelled him to desert his one-time companion at Kidder's hotel. Why should he help him?—why should he risk his own life in a Quixotic movement when it was to his interest to abandon the man to his fate? He had strong reasons for believing that if Abram Belford was dead he was, himself, safer than he had been for years before.

Yet, the good that was in his nature triumphed over the evil and he finally came to a firm decision.

"I will not act the knave; I will do my utmost to throw light on the fate of that man, and if he is dead I will avenge him. Bartlett has a daughter. In what way can I make her useful to me?"

He suddenly turned to the black giant.

"Goliath!"

The man came forward and saluted his captain with a gesture which was graceful and not without dignity. He was a man of superb proportions, and, lacking the awkwardness which renders so many large men mere clowns in their boasted strength, was surprisingly intelligent.

"What do you know of the man Bartlett, at the village?" Captain Bullet abruptly continued.

"He is the richest man at Red Bullet Bar; is the owner of a mine, has a fine house, a handsome daughter and four Chinese servants about the house. Men respect him."

"Because he is rich!" dryly added Bullet Head. "Very well; I am about to begin war on the man. For very good reasons, I hate him; for revenge, I will wring his heart to the core."

"You have only to command, captain," Goliath replied, respectfully.

It was unnecessary information, for Bullet Head already knew his standing in the band; but he sent for his second in command and was soon talking with him confidentially. Lieutenant Darke was a young man and good-looking at that, with his black, curling hair and graceful form. He showed the same respect before noticed in Goliath.

Having received his orders he went away, and once outside his leader's private room his dark face lighted up with joy.

"I don't know what game Bullet Head has under way, but it is clear that the hour of my vengeance is at hand. Lila Bartlett has scornfully declined my offer of marriage; we will see if she will fly so high when she finds herself here. Perhaps I underrate her courage, but I could almost swear she will fall gracefully into my arms. But, what is Bullet Head trying to do? Can he, too, have fallen in love with the fair Lila? Scarcely, for that isn't his way. More likely he wants a few hundred dollars for a ransom. Well, we will see."

That evening Edmund Bartlett's daughter was alone in a grove not far from her father's house. She was one who seemed to live a happy life. She was young, wealthy and admired. Numerous men had been to the mine-owner to seek his consent and aid to a matrimonial end, but he had given as little satisfaction as they had received from Lila.

Evidently, the right man had not yet made his appearance, though it is hard to understand and speak confidently of the workings of a woman's mind.

On this occasion she was in deep thought when she was interrupted by a step near her side. She looked up and saw Darke beside her. The astute lieutenant in his dealings with the people of the village had taken particular care that they should not suspect his connection with the road-agents and he was free to come and go as he pleased.

Lila, however, had once refused him, and her feelings toward him were those of contempt and hate. She arose on seeing who had intruded upon her solitude and would have left the place had not he barred the way.

"Wait!" he said, in a voice of conscious power. "Is the sight of my face enough to drive you away?"

"It's my opinion, it is," she frankly answered.

"It is of no consequence since my superior strength is enough to keep you here."

Darke glanced toward the house and, knowing the place was anything but safe for an interview, quickly, and somewhat brusquely, added:

"I wish to give you one more chance to act sensibly. I have offered you an honest love and I can give you a comfortable home. Do you decline these?"

"Yes!"

She answered with a curtness due to her knowledge of his nature and their past quarrels. He uttered a little whistle and half a dozen men arose from ambush. He allowed her to look for half a minute, smiling grimly as he saw the

color recede from her cheeks, and then, grasping her arm, spoke in a low tone:

"Do you see those men? They are under my command and will obey me implicitly. I have come here to abduct you—I am frank—but it is in your power to save yourself. Go with me to the minister's and then leave Red Bullet Bar with me and you are safe. Take your choice. On one side is love, kindness and a good home; on the other—well, I dare not tell you what may happen. Be warned and choose wisely!"

Lila was alarmed, and there was good reason why she should be, but she was surprisingly firm.

"I choose the least of two evils and decline the honor of your hand!" she answered.

"Beware!"

"Of what?"

"My anger."

"It is preferable to what you call your love," she said, scornfully. "We have talked on this subject before and you know my views. You know I despise you. Let that be sufficient and let us waste no more words."

Darke's face actually paled.

"Have you thought well on this matter?"

"Yes."

"Ten minutes later, if you should wish to change your mind, it will be too late. I speak as one who loves you should speak. Avoid the fate in store for you, if you reject me, as you would avoid the touch of a rattlesnake."

"Enough, Mr. Darke; I see no reason why we should talk further. I am not one to change my views under the persuasive influences of a threat, and as this is not the age of miracles you need not hope for my love."

The last sentence was altogether too much for the lieutenant's composure. A desire for revenge arose superior to all else, and when Lila would have passed him at her last word he caught her arm and, at the same moment, placed one hand over her mouth.

His men understood the turn of affairs; they sprang forward and added their hands to his and the girl's last hope of returning to the house faded away. Not being aware that Darke was a member of Bullet Head's band she had no means of suspecting that she was doomed to go to the lair of that notorious outlaw, but she saw very clearly that her former opinion of Darke had been correct.

The return to the cave was accomplished without trouble and Darke at once reported to his chief. He had no means of knowing what purpose Bullet Head had in view and he lingered for several minutes, but the latter was not in a communicative mood.

Left alone again he devoted half an hour to thought, and then another of his subordinates entered.

"I have been successful," he said. "I happened on one of Bartlett's Chinamen by a neat chance and the fellow is now in the cave."

"What is his mood?"

"He's as cool as you or I could be, sir."

"Then we'll give him until to-morrow to think of it," said the chief. "You may go."

Once more Bullet Head was alone. He arose and began pacing the room in what seemed a vexed and uncertain mood. In point of fact, he was far from being at ease. He was taking steps which might not be prudent.

No one knew better than he that there was a long drama in the life of Abram Belford; a drama in which Bartlett was to a certain degree mixed; and if the troubled waters were brought to a boiling pitch no one could say what might come of it.

Was he doing well to espouse Belford's cause, or would it be better to let the man rest wherever he was, and be forgotten? It was a superfluous question, for he well knew that his own safety demanded that the matter be dropped forever.

Yet, he was resolved to act, and to do all he could for Belford, let the result be what it might.

Tired by his own efforts, the road-agent at last lay down upon the bed at one side of the room, and was soon asleep.

An hour, perhaps more, passed; then he arose, dressed himself, took from the table a glittering knife and a light, and left the room.

His movements were methodical, and yet they were not guided by reason; the fixed gaze of his eyes and the rigidity of his face all betrayed the sleep-walker. Bullet Head, whatever his purpose, was obeying that mysterious monitor which few people meet in their lives; but had any one seen him they would have surmised by the knife he carried that something of a tragic nature was afoot.

But he was unseen. Goliath, who slept near his master, had not been awakened, and the other men, though their position would prevent an intruder from reaching Captain Bullet's quarters, were some distance away.

There is something weird and unnatural about somnambulism; the working of the body without the co-operation of the mind, can, at the best, suggest nothing more pleasant than an accident to the sleep-walker; while in the present case the knife gave an ominous air to Bullet Head's solitary promenade.

He moved on steadily, not once turning to

the right or left, his lamp held well up and his knife well forward, and his gaze fixed straight ahead.

In this way he advanced to a place where a door had been neatly fitted to an opening in the rocky wall. At that time it was bolted and barred, but it was only a short piece of work to remove these obstacles.

The somnambulist opened the door, and passed through.

The second room was small, and had been fitted up as a sleeping apartment. On the bed lay Lila Bartlett, soundly sleeping. She had laid down without removing her clothing, and despite her trouble, had lost consciousness in slumber.

Bullet Head paused beside the bed, and fixed his gaze upon her fair face. Unconscious he certainly was, but his eyes saw, and he was following some wild idea of his mind or of its phantasy—a dream.

Unstable as was the cause which led him, he had come with a settled purpose, and without a change of countenance he raised his knife on high, and with his gaze fixed on her expanding chest, prepared for the fatal blow.

CHAPTER V.

ALLEN QUAIN.

ONE afternoon a young man approached a mansion-like residence on one of the best streets of the city of St. Louis, ascended the steps and rung the bell. His air was neither indifferent, timid nor bashful, but rather like that of a man who has some task which he has resolved to perform regardless of some unpleasant element.

He was shown to the parlor by the servant, where he was soon joined by a tall, gray-haired man in whose appearance one could read the fact that he was at once a man of business and of wealth.

The visitor arose.

"Good-morning, Mr. Quain," said the elder man. "I am informed that you have business with me."

No smile crossed his face, he remained standing, and his manner was far from being polite; but he had to deal with a man who possessed a good deal of quiet firmness.

"You are right, Mr. Jackson," he replied, with outward calmness. "I have come to ask the hand of your daughter in marriage."

The blunt announcement, made under such unfavorable circumstances, did not cause a change of expression on the face of the elder man, but it did have the effect of causing him to sit down.

"I feared as much," he coldly observed.

Not a very promising comment for a lover to hear, but though Allen Quain's heart sunk, metaphorically speaking, he retained his outward calmness.

"I love Miss Jackson," he continued, "and, as you know, have the means of providing her with a comfortable home."

"I am aware," said Jackson, coldly, "that you are the heir of Mr. Garland, the lawyer. So far as money goes, all is satisfactory, and it would be the same if you had not a dollar. Still, I cannot consent to the marriage."

"And why not?"

"I trust you will not press me for an answer."

"Do you know aught derogatory to my character?"

"Nothing. To tell the truth, I have never investigated the matter, but I believe your general reputation to be good."

"Then, sir, why do you discourage me?"

Mr. Jackson remained silent for some time, half-unconsciously handling a paper-weight which lay on the table. He was far from being a heartless man, and would gladly have spared his visitor the pain he must give if he spoke plainly; but as his daughter, Rose, was old enough to act for herself, he felt sure that she would become Mrs. Allen Quain unless he took some decisive step to stop it, and, oddly enough, he relied on the honor of the would-be husband as a preventative.

"Can't I persuade you to abandon this useless hope by saying that I do not approve of it?"

"With all possible respect for you, I must request a well-founded reason," answered the suitor, in a respectful voice where a firm resolution was also apparent.

He was a gentlemanly young fellow, in manners, dress and look, and it was the fact that he believed himself to be the social equal of Rose Jackson that he spoke with so much quiet firmness.

"Then, Mr. Quain, I must speak plainly and open to you a chapter in your life of which I believe you ignorant. If what I relate causes you unhappiness, remember that I spoke at your command."

Allen was bewildered, but he steadily directed his companion to proceed.

"You live, I believe, with your uncle, Mr. Eben Garland, and your mother, Mrs. Quain. Have you any other relatives?"

"None near enough to be considered, sir."

"What of your father?"

"He died years ago."

"Are you sure?"

"Certainly. At least," he added, "I have always been told so."

"Have you seen his grave?"

"He was lost on the Mississippi, by the destruction of a steamer."

"We will not argue that, for it is unimportant. Allow me to ask what you know of this parent—of his life, labor and character?"

Allen hesitated.

"As he died when I was a mere child," he evasively answered, "I remember nothing of him. My mother and uncle, however, will tell you of him."

"I already know all I care to," was the dry reply. "Some records are best left covered by a veil."

Allen flushed with anger.

"Your words, Mr. Jackson, require an explanation," he said, more warmly than he knew. "What do you know that is not creditable to my father?"

"Among other things, the fact that he fled from St. Louis something like twenty years ago after being the chief in a plot to rob and garrote a man on the street. The scheme was carried out so far as the garroting was concerned, but as the thieves were securing their plunder they were attacked in turn—by the police. One of them, Thomas Quain, was recognized, but, being strong and desperate men, they fought their way out of immediate danger and fled, even as Quain afterward fled from the city."

Allen listened to this statement in amazement.

"I do not believe it!" he declared.

"For verification, I refer you to the police records," was the unmoved reply.

"And you charge my father with being a thief and murderer?"

"You have heard. But," the older man added, "I know of no way to prove him a murderer. The victim of the affair just described, recovered. Unless some other episode in Mr. Quain's life rises to the dignity of murder, he had, or has, no human blood on his hands."

Allen Quain stared at the speaker like one in a dream. He did not doubt but that Jackson spoke according to his belief, but while he saw that there was indeed a barrier between Rosa and himself, he was far from being convinced that he was a murderer's son. At the same time, however, he could not forget that Mrs. Quain had often gently repulsed all his efforts to learn anything of his late father's life. He had attributed this to the revival of a vain sorrow on her part, and respected her wishes as such, but he now began to see more ways than one to account for it.

He made an effort to recover his calmness.

"You have spoken of what I have never before heard, but I shall now investigate earnestly. And—and—in case," began the young man, stammeringly, but he recovered his command of speech in a moment: "In case all is as you say, must I then be judged by my father?"

Mr. Jackson frowned.

"You are resolved that I shall wound you in every possible way," he said, with vexation born of real regret. "You force me to add that I trust your mother's family as little as I do your father. Against your mother, I will not say a word; I know of nothing to her discredit. If you are as well informed as you ought to be, however, you must know that Eben Garland bears the reputation of being one of the most crafty, hypocritical and unscrupulous lawyers in St. Louis."

Allen colored deeply, for the charge against his uncle was not new. At the same time he was so overwhelmed by pain and mortification that he felt only an earnest desire to get away from Jackson's house.

The terrible, but by no means malicious, accusations had deprived him of all mental strength.

Such being the case, he made a few hasty remarks, the meaning of which he could not have told three minutes later, and somehow found his way to the street.

The ordinary reader can not understand how heavily this blow had fallen on him. Even while thoroughly manly and of a cool, practical nature, he was very sensitive in some ways. It had been a thorn in his flesh that Eben Garland should mix such dubious arts with his law practice, and now he was called upon to know that his father had been a thief and garroter.

But had Mr. Jackson spoken truly? That was just what he intended to learn, and he was on his way to ask that mother who had always been so kind to him.

He little suspected that that day was destined to mark a great change in his life.

He was striding through a humble street when his name was pronounced and he turned to see an old man who was no stranger. He had been Eben Garland's servant for many years, until overtaken by age and its infirmities, and it at once flashed upon Allen that there was the chance to learn something of Thomas Quain.

At the same time, he knew old Jacob would protect his feelings in an ordinary case, and once in the old man's room he made up a sensa-

tional recital which made Rose Jackson quite as much of an angel as girls usually are, while her father stood out as a tyrant who mocked him for his father's errors.

Jacob fell into the trap and spoke explosively, but what he said was far from Allen's mind, and not only unexpected but amazing.

"How dared he do it?" cried the old man. "How dared he? I'll have him understand you're as good as he is. There ain't no Quain blood in your veins, nor Garland blood, either; and I defy Jackson to say anything against your parents, for *nobody knows who they are!*"

Allen Quain had indeed shot at one target and hit another, and he sat staring blankly at Jacob.

"What?" he cried, after a moment. "Wasn't Thomas Quain my father?—isn't Mabel Quain my mother?"

"No!" declared Jacob, "for I was there when Tom brought you in, one wet night, with your little body soaked to the skin, and he said, 'We will take this boy in place of our own; I was hired to put him out of the way, but I can't do it."

Allen had grown more bewildered.

"How can he put me in the place of his own?"

"Didn't I tell you? His boy died, and I was there to look out for the house while Mrs. Quain wept over her babe in the next room. Tom had gone off like a shot, two hours before, and we didn't know why, but we saw clearer when he came in with the second babe—yourself."

"Will you swear to this?" Allen cried, starting up.

Jacob hesitated.

"Yes, I will," he then said, sturdily. "I swore to Tom Quain, then, that I would never blow on him, for he wanted a son to inherit Eben Garland's wealth, but if the fact that Quain was supposed to be your father is going to hurt you, it's time for me to tell the truth. You're no Quain!"

"Then, in Heaven's name, who am I?" cried the young man.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SECRET OF TWENTY YEARS.

ALLEN had felt a temporary exultation on learning that none of that blood which Mr. Jackson objected to flowed in his veins, but the emotion was severely shaken when it was followed by the one which he put into words—if he was not a Quain, who was he?

The question caused old Jacob to hesitate.

"I'm sure I don't know," he admitted, after a pause.

Allen sat staring blankly at his old friend. He had received two severe blows in one day, and they struck at the most vulnerable point of an honorable man after his own honor is excepted—that of his parents.

Rallying, he questioned Jacob further, but it was little he could tell.

Twenty years before he—Jacob Vail—had been a dependent on the bounty of Eben Garland, by reason of an accident which happened to him when he was working for Garland. The nature of the accident would probably have given him two thousand dollars in a court of law, but Eben, with his usual astuteness, compromised the matter by harboring him until he was well; after which, as Eben's circumstances had improved, he was retained as a servant.

At the time of the accident Garland was a clerk in the banking-house of Reginald Sinclair, and Thomas Quain was living by his wits about town. His wife, it will be remembered, was Garland's sister.

From this fact Quain hoped for a golden future. Garland was well-to-do, and Quain knew his nature well enough to feel sure he would one day be rich, and it was his pet scheme that his son should inherit his brother-in-law's money.

As a result, he had been furious when his child fell suddenly ill and died, but, according to Jacob, he had substituted another child with remarkable quickness; and that child Jacob, from seeing him almost daily, was ready to swear was the young man who then sat opposite him in the room.

"It is singular you gained no clew to who I really was," said Allen, as we will continue to call him, who had listened most attentively.

"Not at all. Quain was afraid Garland would detect the cheat and make a fuss, so he made us swear never to mention the matter. Your mother—that is, Mrs. Quain—was so afraid of Tom that she never would have dared open her mouth. Mr. Jackson didn't color the portrait of Tom Quain a bit. He was a hard man. I believe every crime known to man was on his head and hand—and yet his fellow-criminals called him the squarest man that ever lived," Jacob slowly added.

It was all he could tell, and when convinced of the fact Allen Quain left the room and continued his way homeward. He walked with a firm step and an erect head, for he had formed a fixed resolution. He would know his parentage or spend his life in trying.

He felt relieved at having cast off the Quain and Garland blood, and though the future

might have worse in store for him, he would try his luck.

"Eben Garland is now at his office and I will go to my mother and entreat her to tell me all."

Despite what he had learned, Allen was in no hot haste to cast off Mrs. Quain. If not his mother, she had been a tender and affectionate protector and guide, and her words of counsel had instilled into his mind principles of honor which, from Garland's point of view, constituted his only weakness.

Mabel Garland was very different from her brother, and would have lived an exemplary life had she been wedded to an honorable man; and even the five years she spent in Thomas Quain's society had not swerved her far from honor's path. Her only fault was her weakness, a fault which caused her to bear the infamy of Quain and Eben in silence and protect their miserable and guilty secrets.

Such a case is not new in the annals of woman-kind.

Once in her society, Allen bluntly stated what he had learned, making the revelation as plain and terse as possible.

Mrs. Quain dropped at once into a chair and her pale face became paler yet. She looked like one whom a rude wind would sweep away like a feather, and this was one of the great shocks of her life.

"I know all," resumed Allen, impetuously, "that occurred in your house. I know of the death of your own child and how Thomas Quain substituted another, so that Eben Garland's fortune need not be lost to the Quain family. In fact, I know all except one thing. I am not your son; who, then, am I?"

The young man had hoped by thus hastening matters to wring an unguarded admission from Mrs. Quain's lips, but she was too deeply moved to speak even one word. He dropped on his knees beside her.

"Won't you answer my question?" he pleadingly asked.

Mrs. Quain rallied somewhat; she drew a deep breath like one in pain, and then the tears started from her eyes.

"You know, you know!" she uttered, "and I have lost him whom I have called my son; I have lost his love and his respect."

"Wrong, mother, wrong. Hear—I still call you by that noble name, for you have been the good angel of my existence. You have not lost me, for I will never desert you. If by any chance better days should come to me, you must share them."

Mrs. Quain was deeply touched, and he soon succeeded in drying her tears, after which he repeated his question in a persuasive manner.

The timid woman shivered.

"I dare not tell," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because I swore to my husband that I would not."

"Do you fear that you would be held blamable for breaking an unjust pledge?"

"Not by Heaven—" she began, quickly, and then paused.

"By whom, then?" Allen asked; and then, as she did not answer, he added: "You are thinking of Thomas Quain?"

"Yes," she hesitatingly admitted.

"I will protect you from him. His character has been described to me and I do not wonder at your feelings, but I promise he shall not harm you. Besides, is not his long silence, covering as it does nearly a score of years, a proof that he is either dead or has forsaken all who knew him here?"

"I feel that he is still alive; that I shall see him again, and that, too, to my cost," the unfortunate woman said, shivering. "Besides, I know nothing of your parentage."

The last words were spoken in a manner which Allen was not slow to interpret.

"But you have a suspicion," he added, quickly.

"I did not say so," she as quickly returned.

Allen felt himself prodding slowly, but it was at least half an hour before he could make her confess anything. Then, she first admitted what Jacob had told, and when duly urged, she went further.

"I have always had a suspicion," she said, with another shiver. "The second day after you came into our house a fine gentleman called to see Thomas. They were closeted together for some time, and I would not have dared listen if I had wished to, but at one point a singular remark greeted my ears as I was passing the door.

"What have you done with the child?" asked the visitor.

"He has gone to feed the Mississippi fishes," Thomas replied.

"Do you speak the truth?" was the sharp demand.

"I swear it!" Mr. Quain solemnly said.

"Very well; I accept your word; but if I find you have deceived me, I will put you in prison for a term which will whiten your hair behind the bars!"

"My husband protested that he spoke the truth and his visitor seemed satisfied, but a suspicion had seized me. The child of which they spoke was the same one that Thomas had

brought to our house; I even remembered hearing him say, 'Well, youngster, this is better than a bed in the river!'

"Beyond a doubt, you were right," said Allen, eagerly. "But, proceed, proceed!"

"My curiosity became so great that I resolved to see the visitor plainly. I looked and recognized him."

"Who was he?" Allen eagerly asked.

"At that time my brother was a clerk in the office of Reginald Sinclair, banker. Once, in calling on an errand to Eben, I saw this man there and heard him address Mr. Sinclair as 'Uncle Reginald,' though I afterward learned that he was too remote a relative to use the term rightfully. Well, his name was Edmund Bartlett."

"Edmund Bartlett."

"Yes."

Allen repeated the name as though he would brand it forever on his mind. If Edmund Bartlett knew aught of his parentage, he must be found and made to talk, though from the anxiety he had exhibited to believe the babe they had mentioned as being at the bottom of the Mississippi, it was plain he was an enemy.

"And this Bartlett was a relative, slightly removed from the degree of being a nephew, of one Reginald Sinclair, a banker. Here are two pieces of evidence; it will be strange if both men have disappeared so completely that they cannot be traced and found."

Mrs. Quain shivered again.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Sinclair is dead. He was murdered the night before you were brought to our house."

"Murdered by whom?"

"By Robert Sinclair, his nephew, heir and confidential clerk," said the woman, sighing. "The papers at the time were full of the terrible affair."

"One clew the less. But Robert Sinclair, the murderer—what of him? Was he hung?"

"No. He escaped pursuit and vanished from all who knew him; at least, I never heard of his being seen."

Allen was silent for a moment, but his mind was busy. He had thrown himself, heart and soul, into the task of solving the mystery of his life, and, having accepted Mrs. Quain's view of the meaning of Edmund Bartlett's visit, his mind was tenaciously fixed on the Sinclair family.

"Who was the elder Sinclair's heir, after Robert?" he resumed, after a pause.

"Edmund Bartlett."

"Aha! And was Robert married?"

"No. He lived in a house a little out of town, with a widow for a housekeeper, and it was there the elder man was murdered. It seemed that Robert had forged his uncle's name to some checks, and that they quarreled first at the bank. It was supposed that the old gentleman went to the house to settle the matter up amicably, but that another quarrel followed and Robert killed his uncle in a moment of ungovernable rage, or else deliberately when threatened with unavoidable prosecution for the forgery."

CHAPTER VII. FOLLOWING THE CLEW.

EXPLANATIONS did not serve to clear away the cloud of mystery, so far. To Allen it seemed as though there must be some connection between the Sinclair tragedy and his own appearance at Quain's cottage, though he was far from being sorry to hear that Robert had been unmarried.

He was not anxious to claim as a parent a man who was branded as a known murderer; better be the son of Thomas Quain, thief and garroter though he was.

"Well, the Sinclair trail fails," he musingly said. "It looks as though Edmund Bartlett, alone, knew anything about me, aside from Quain."

The woman murmured "Yes" in so faint a voice that he suddenly aroused again.

"But such is not your opinion," he said. "What then?"

"I had better tell no more," she said.

"I implore you to tell all you suspect."

"The papers said that the housekeeper of the unfortunate Robert shared his flight; at least, she, too, disappeared that night."

"Well?" he eagerly questioned.

"The neighbors said she had a child, a baby boy. His disappearance ranked as the third mystery of the day."

"You suspect that I am that child?"

Mrs. Quain again hesitated and then answered in the affirmative.

"And the son of Robert Sinclair," she added.

Allen suddenly contracted his brows, but she read the look aright and supplemented:

"Provided Edmund Bartlett was instrumental in getting you out of sight, it must be he was afraid of you, and as you were a mere babe he could have had no ground for fear except that you stood between him and Reginald Sinclair's wealth. To be such an obstacle, you must have been Robert Sinclair's lawful son."

Her way of presenting the case was very convincing, and, forgetting that to claim such a parentage was to admit himself the son of an

assassin, he grasped the theory eagerly and said:

"If Robert was married there must have been some record made of the ceremony. Could you not have satisfied your mind on that point?"

"I dared not," she said, quickly. "Had Thomas suspected I was making an investigation—"

A significant pause ended the sentence.

"It is not too late," said Allen, emphatically. "I am going to press this matter. With the wealth of the elder Sinclair in his hands, Edmund Bartlett cannot have drifted beyond the knowledge of every one. Ay, and uncle Eben should know where he is."

"I advise you not to seek for information there," said Mrs. Quain, with visible embarrassment.

"Why not?"

"I should have confided in Eben at the time had I not suspected that he was my husband's confidant, perhaps his ally. Having confessed so much I may as well add that I believe Eben hailed the accession of Bartlett to the property. And yet," she added, "he lost his situation through it."

Allen was quick to grasp the thoughts in her mind. If Eben Garland was glad of change of management which deprived him of his situation, it was because he really lost nothing from a financial point of view.

It was not strange that the young man began to be bewildered. Granted that Edmund Bartlett had wronged the Sinclairs in any way, it seemed as though both Quain and Garland had been his confederates. But, what had they done?—what was that long-vailed chapter of the past?

One moment Allen, despite a buoyant and somewhat romantic nature, deemed himself foolish for considering the matter seriously, but he knew Mrs. Quain well enough to read in her flushed cheeks and unusually bright eyes that she was glad that she had broken loose from the silence of years.

He saw, too, that she had gradually led him along the path of suspicion to where he now stood. His ideas were hers also, and they were not the wild conjectures of a single moment, but the result of the study of years.

Seeing that she was reluctant to speak of Eben Garland, he asked if she knew of any one else to whom he could apply, but she did not. Despite her suspicions, she had made it a rule to know nothing of the Sinclairs. At that time she was living with Quain, and if she had become so interested in the case as to mutter in her sleep, she would have feared for her life.

Satisfied that he could learn no more from her, Allen went out, but not to rest in inactivity. If Robert Sinclair had been married, there should be some record of the ceremony somewhere. He determined to look for it.

Not to tire the reader with his research, enough to say that he found it. Nearly two years before the murder of the banker, the younger man had married Elnora Vincent.

Having learned this, Allen reflected. Beyond a doubt Robert had kept the marriage secret. He had lived in the out-of-town cottage and his wife had passed for his housekeeper. After the murder, neither Robert, his wife nor his child had been seen again near St. Louis, but, according to the papers of the day, the assassin had been traced and it was a fact that he had gone alone.

Where, then, had his wife gone?

Secondly, what had become of the babe?

Allen reflected and resolved to apply to Eben Garland, using such artifices as would lull the suspicions of that individual. The plan was carried into effect that evening, at a time when Mrs. Quain had absented herself from the room in anticipation of it.

Mr. Garland was one of the most plausible, smooth-spoken men who ever practiced at the bar. He was not eloquent, he never thrilled the crowd in the court-room, he arose in his might only when examining a witness. His strength as a lawyer, and he was successful, lay chiefly in what he did, rather than what he said, and irreverent people had given him such sobriquets as "Old Crafty," "Tricky Eb," and so on almost without limit.

On the evening in question the lawyer was in an unusually good-humored mood. He had made a hit in the financial line that day and was duly impressed by the fact. His thin, leathery face was not one to radiate joy, but he could be as bland as a spring morning when he felt happy.

Allen led him on to speak of his "successful career," as the young man cunningly termed it, and Eben felt flattered and grew communicative. He had never had a suspicion that Allen was not his nephew and there seemed to be no reason why he should not tell as much of his life as would bear the light of day.

The younger man really felt little interest until Eben told how he had entered the banking-house of Reginald Sinclair. Then he began to ask some questions. Were the banks of that day like those of 1881?

Mr. Garland talked quite freely and dwelt—perhaps more persistently than the facts of the

case would warrant—on the trust reposed in him by Sinclair.

"He was a fine man, an excellent man, and my position would have been a pleasant one had it not been for his nephew, Robert. The latter was cordially disliked by all; he seemed to think us thieves and scoundrels."

The lawyer's voice arose a little and there was every evidence of anger in his manner.

"Did you leave?" Allen carelessly asked.

"Not while Reginald Sinclair lived," answered Eben, who then paused and only resumed after a reflective pause of some duration. "Robert proved the material of which he was made in an emphatic manner. He murdered his uncle!"

"Indeed! What was his object?"

"To hide his rascalities," said Mr. Garland, in an even voice, and then he gave the same account of the affair that his listener had heard from Mrs. Quain, but in all ways showing that he hated Robert.

"And the mystery of his disappearance has never been cleared up?" questioned Allen.

"He was traced to near New Orleans, where the trail ended. It was believed he escaped on a South American craft, though nothing definite was known."

"His housekeeper accompanied him, I suppose?"

"No." A considerable silence followed the monosyllable, and then the lawyer added:

"She died soon after the affair and was buried here in St. Louis. Few people know this fact; fewer still suspect, when they see the plain stone in the cemetery which is simply marked 'Mrs. Smith,' that there lies all that remains of the housekeeper of Robert Sinclair."

The old man spoke musingly, as though forgetful of the fact that he had an auditor, and Allen felt that he was speaking the truth, even while it occurred to him that this was another proof that Garland had been concerned in the affair. If few knew that the woman was buried there, he must have been well-informed to be among the few.

Allen yawned.

"Did you know her?" he carelessly asked.

"I hope not; I would not be proud to acknowledge acquaintance with the wretched creature."

"Then she wasn't an angel?"

Garland seemed on the point of making a hasty reply, and then checked himself and cynically observed:

"Few people are."

"The chief result of the tragedy, then, was that this Edmund Bartlett you have mentioned succeeded to the property, I suppose?"

Eben's eyes suddenly arose and his gaze became fixed on his putative nephew's face, but Allen looked so lazily indifferent that he unreservedly answered affirmatively.

"Is Bartlett still in business here?" the younger man continued, as he began winding his watch listlessly.

"No. He is now in Colorado, in a town called Red Bullet Bar, where he is a shining light. He owns a mine there and, I suppose, is worth two millions. He has property here, which I look after, and he said in a late letter that he would probably settle up his affairs in Colorado and return here within a year."

This was about all the old lawyer had to tell, but Allen had learned something of importance. The housekeeper of Robert Sinclair, who had really been his wife also, was dead, while Bartlett was living in the West.

With his suspicions once started, the young man wove a theory to suit himself. Bartlett had known of the secret marriage of Robert Sinclair, and when the latter had fled after murdering the old banker, Bartlett saw only the infant between him and a fortune.

As a result, being unscrupulous, he resolved to remove them. The "housekeeper," or Mrs. Sinclair, as she should be called, was spirited away and afterward kept out of sight—perhaps imprisoned—until she died and was buried in the cemetery as "Mrs. Smith;" while Thomas Quain, according to Allen's theory, had been hired to throw the young heir in the river, but instead, he brought him to the house.

Bartlett's connection with the affair was proved by his visit to Quain, and the conversation overheard by Mrs. Quain; while Garland had just confessed that he knew how Mrs. Sinclair had died.

"Bartlett cheated the child out of a fortune, aided by Quain and Garland," thought the young man, when alone in his room. "If I am not mistaken, I am that child, but I can't say I am proud of the fact. As well be the son of Thomas Quain, who is nearly forgotten, as of Robert Sinclair, who will long be remembered for his crime. I had hoped by establishing a new parentage to prove myself worthy of Rose Jackson, but I only go from bad to worse. I shall not seek to prove that I am a Sinclair, and Rose—"

He paused, arose and began to pace the room, only to return and resume his seat. What of Rose? He felt sure she would follow his fortunes, let them be what they would, but he knew that a marriage against the wishes of

Mr. Jackson would be sure to separate Rose from the mother whom she cared for so deeply.

"I will rest for a while and hope for a change in Mr. Jackson's feelings, and in the meanwhile I might—"

Again Allen paused. The impulse was strong in his mind to investigate further the Sinclair affair, to get more light on the case of Edmund Bartlett, of Red Bullet Bar.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEW LIGHT ON THE CASE.

BEFORE Allen slept that night he had made a resolution; before noon of the following day he proceeded to carry it out. He called upon a man of his acquaintance who had at one time been a detective. This man, whose name was Blenker, would doubtless remember a good deal about the Sinclair case, and Allen knew he could trust him.

He frankly stated his wish; but without giving any reason. The ex-detective looked at him sharply.

"Why are you interested in the case?" he asked.

"My uncle was giving me an outline of it the other day, and as you were then a detective, I thought you might tell more."

"What did Garland tell you?"

Allen repeated the story, omitting only that part which referred to the "housekeeper's" grave.

"That is the story known to the world," said Blenker, slowly, and then, with an abrupt change of manner, and with a good deal of emphasis, he added: "I wish I knew the inward facts of the case!"

"Hasn't everything been told?"

Blenker smiled quietly.

"My young friend, if the criminal history that is smothered was written out, people would be astonished."

This was a beginning, and after some persuasion the old man was made to tell what he knew.

At the time of the Sinclair murder he—Blenker—was a member of the detective force, and he was among the first men sent to the scene of the tragedy after it was reported at police quarters.

Except for the dead man and those who had discovered him, the house was deserted, Robert Sinclair, the housekeeper and her infant son had disappeared. Blenker had no clew to begin upon. Reginald Sinclair had not been recognized; for, in order to visit his nephew, he had gone several miles from his home.

Blenker went eagerly at work. His first discovery was that the rear door had been forced open. There, he argued, the assassin had entered, and near there, too, the mud had fallen from his boots, though he had removed them after going some ten feet or more. The size of the boots had been about eights.

The next clew was at the door of the dead man's room. Blenker decided that he had locked the door before retiring, leaving the key in the door. The marks of burglar's tools were on both key and lock; hence, the door had been forced. Next, not a penny was found in the deceased's pockets; it looked as though a thief had entered the house and killed him for his money.

Such was Blenker's report to his superiors, but by night a far different theory had been established—that which all the world knew; how Robert had killed his uncle because of the quarrel over the forgeries, and then fled.

Blenker did not believe this theory, and he began to make a stir to confirm his own. His experienced eyes saw proof enough that Robert Sinclair had not been concerned in the affair, and he presented his views energetically to his superiors. They listened coldly, and when he called at the office the following morning he was directed to proceed to California, and bring a captured criminal back to St. Louis; an unpleasant order against which he protested in vain.

The work, by means of delays, occupied six months; when he returned, the Sinclair case was practically settled and forgotten.

"I was not allowed to work further upon it," he added; "and my superiors left me only my convictions."

"And they?"

"Were that Robert Sinclair had no hand in the murder, but that the case was smothered."

It was an assertion which Allen had mentally anticipated, but it did not prevent a start of mingled emotion. Just then, nothing worldly would have caused him more pleasure than to know that Robert Sinclair was innocent, and the opinion of a skilled detective was not to be despised.

"But," he argued, after a brief pause, "if he was not guilty, why did he flee?"

"That is the mystery which I would have solved if left alone," said Blenker, in unmistakable vexation. "Of course, he had a motive for his going, and a drama was doubtless somewhere mixed up. It may be the quarrel over the banker, and Robert, thinking prosecution inevitable, believed his only safety to be in flight; and that, after he went, thieves entered

the house and killed the uncle. I have before said that the intruder's boots were eights, while Robert's were but fives. Again, the forcing of the doors was done by practiced burglars, and it is not likely Robert could tell the tool used from a corkscrew."

"In your opinion, what became of the house-keeper and her child?"

"Despite the oft-repeated assertion that Robert went alone, I believe the housekeeper went with him. She was pretty, and he was not blind—I believe they went together."

Allen hesitated for a moment, and then said:

"Mr. Blenker, I believe she was his wife."

The ex-detective whistled.

"Why do you think so?"

"Because I know he had been secretly married to some one."

Allen's confidence thus begun, he did not pause until he had told all and to the minutest degree. He knew who he was talking to, he had decided that the ex-detective was the man upon whom he must rely for aid if he had help from any one; and Blenker was still an active and intelligent man.

He exhibited no surprise at Allen's story, and felt as little as he showed; but his eyes sparkled with professional zeal.

Ah! that he had known as much as that twenty years before! Then it would have been easy to hunt down Edmund Bartlett, if he was concerned in the matter.

"It may not be too late now," said Allen, eagerly.

Blenker shook his head.

"Few trails survive the test of twenty years."

"Yet, Bartlett and Eben Garland still live."

"One might as well try to wring a secret from a flint rock as from Garland. I know him of old. Hope nothing from that quarter."

"But what of Bartlett?"

"He is easily reached, though some distance away. Red Bullet Bar is near the line of the Denver & Rio Grande Railway, I think. But, once there, what would you do? If, as we suspect, the man was the principal in an infamous plot, he is not going to betray himself."

"He must be made to confess."

"How?"

It was a question which Allen could not answer, and he said as much, but Blenker showed no disposition to drop the case. It was one which had weighed upon his mind for twenty years, and troubled him not a little. Now, Allen's revelations had added fuel to the smoldering fire, and he felt all his professional zeal aroused.

"I want to think of this matter," he said, at last. "It is a pity that we cannot find Tom Quain. Since he did not kill the babe, he ought to be willing to talk if properly fed with gold. He would be in no danger—"

The ex-detective paused.

"Of what?"

"It has just occurred to me that he may be the slayer of Reginald. He had the grandson: perhaps it was also a part of his work to kill the old man."

"Then let us find Quain!" the younger man exclaimed.

"How will we do it?" Blenker dryly asked.

Again his practical nature had checked the more ardent one of his young friend, but Allen was not long at fault.

"Advertise!" he said.

"But Quain left here in consequence of a crime which would give him fifteen or more years, if he was taken. An advertisement would keep him away, rather than bring him to St. Louis."

"An ordinary one would; but he might be lured by a trap. Why can't we insert a notice which would lead him to think he had fallen heir to a large sum of money?"

Blenker pronounced the idea a good one, and promised to give due thought to it; whereupon the two separated to meet again the next day.

Allen returned home. Several letters lay upon the table in the sitting-room, one of which was for Eben Garland. As it was an unusual circumstance for the lawyer to receive any mail at the house, Allen looked with a listless curiosity at the post-mark.

It was "Red Bullet Bar, Colorado!"

No explanation was necessary. The letter was from Edmund Bartlett, beyond a doubt; but the firm sealing hid the contents from his view. He held it to the light of the window and characters began to form; the envelope was one of those thin ones that reveal more than the writer intends.

Allen did not scruple to make use of the information thus afforded, and the following fragments were open to his view, consisting of a portion of several lines:

"He must be brought to Red"; "confined in a secret place under"; "my cellar, where no one will"; "he must die there alone."

Such were the very startling extracts open to Allen's view; singular extracts, indeed, to be in the letter of a middle-aged millionaire to his lawyer.

The nature of the letter was such that the

young man was tempted to open it then and there, but while he hesitated Eben Garland's footsteps sounded in the hall, and he had barely time to toss it back on the table, bury himself in an arm-chair and pretend to be busy with a paper when the lawyer entered.

Knowing that he would take no notice of the letter, so seldom did he receive one except at his office, and wishing to watch while he read, Allen carelessly called his attention to it, at the same time watching him in a mirror across the room.

A frown crossed Garland's face at sight of the handwriting and he glanced quickly at his nephew. The latter, while secretly watching, seemed busy with his paper and the lawyer's gaze was withdrawn.

He walked to the window, sat down and read the letter. By that time he was on his guard and his face gave no sign; but when he had finished he sat for so long a time in deep meditation that Allen could not but see that there had been food for deep thought within the envelope.

He suspected, too, that Eben was far from being pleased.

Alone in his room the young man took his turn at meditation.

"Beyond a doubt, that letter was from Edmund Bartlett. Now, why does he write thus? According to what I saw, some one is to be lured to Red Bullet Bar, confined in a secret place, and killed. Can it be these two men have been engaged in another crime, besides the ruin of Robert Sinclair? I would give a good deal to know the name of the man referred to in the letter. Why can't I? The letter, unless previously destroyed, will to-night remain in Garland's pocket. Why can't I enter when he is asleep, and read it?"

CHAPTER IX.

A MIDNIGHT DRAMA.

ALLEN had not arrived at the point of considering such a step without remembering that it is considered very dishonorable to examine another person's letters under any condition; but the idea had taken firm possession of his mind that Bartlett and Garland had been partners in a nefarious crime a score of years before, and that it had been continued up to the present time; and he thought himself morally justified in using any and all means to baffle them.

"If they wronged me out of my birthright, it is quite time that I struck back," he thought.

Five minutes later, as he went over the ground again, he was ready to say that his idea that he was a Sinclair was absurd, foolish, mad; but it is hard to subdue what has become a ruling passion.

Thus it was that, at midnight, he left his room and proceeded to that of his putative uncle. He tried the door and found it locked, but this did not surprise him—Eben Garland had never been known to sleep with an unlocked door or with a window unfastened. He considered the benefits of fresh air of small importance to that of being secure from lawless men. He spent one-half of his life in wronging his fellow-beings, and the other half in dreading their return blows.

Luckily, however, he had a weak point—his heart! Not that he was in love, but that equally fatal and more speedy disease, at which men never laugh, had fastened upon him. Knowing he was liable to die suddenly at any time, he had an extra key to the door which he left in charge of Allen.

By means of this key the young man intended to enter.

He listened; all remained silent. He turned the key, pushed the door ajar and again listened. The lawyer's regular breathing was the only sound he heard. All seemed favorable.

Then he passed through the door and his attempt had fairly begun. He was greatly aided by a knowledge of Eben's systematic habits; he felt sure that at a certain point he would find a chair, and over the chair-back the coat which contained the desired letter.

Cautiously he moved forward, listening after each step, but the old man slept on quietly.

Allen, however, was doomed to a disagreeable surprise. Without the least warning a pair of muscular arms closed about his body, pinioning his arms, and a voice hissed in his ear:

"Not a word, or you die!"

It was a fair warning, but Allen was not the kind of a man to remain inactive in such a case, while his long practice in a gymnasium had given him many tricks not known to the ordinary man.

Thus it was that, an instant after the warning, his heels flew up, described a half circle in the air and, while the unknown's hold was broken, Allen alighted fairly on his feet.

Another moment and he had seized the unknown in a tenacious grasp, which was at once returned, though the same voice again arose:

"Let go, or I'll stab you to the heart!"

Allen's only reply was to catch him in a relentless lock and stretch him at full length on the floor, falling over his person as he did so. As they went down a voice which was clearly that of Eben Garland arose in wild cries of alarm.

The combatants were too much interested to heed him. They arose together, seizing each

other for a new grapple, but the comparative silence of the room was broken by a new sound. Crack! crack! crack!

Three times a revolver spoke viciously, and at the last report the man in Allen's grasp gave a little spring, his hold loosened and he fell to the floor.

Allen recognized the danger of the indiscriminate firing in which Garland was indulging and called to him to stop, as the danger was all over, and produce a light in place of his revolver.

Excited as the old man was he started to obey at once, as was proved by the sound of his heels striking the floor.

Allen's hopes seemed frustrated, but the ruling passion was not easily destroyed and he resolved to make one more effort; so glided toward the chair where he felt sure he would find the lawyer's coat.

He was not mistaken. The coat was there, and, running his hand into the breast-pocket he found one letter, as it seemed to be. Beyond a doubt it was that for which he was searching.

He had been given barely enough time to conceal it when a sudden gleam of light flooded the room as Eben succeeded in lighting the gas.

An impressive scene was revealed.

Garland stood under the gas-jet, the stub of his match in one hand and a revolver in the other, and Allen stood by the chair, his gaze directed toward where he had expected to see his late antagonist.

The latter was not there.

The shrill voice of the lawyer at once announced that he had discovered him and his scinting finger directed his supposed nephew's gaze to one of the windows. There the unknown was to be seen, the red trail along the floor telling of a laborious crawl to reach it, and as he looked back, his manner a mixture of apprehension and fury, he was impressive, if not noble.

His burly frame, brutal features and slovenly dress, all betrayed the typical rough.

"We have him! we have him!" added the lawyer, in an excited manner. "He is wounded and cannot escape. Seize him, Allen, seize him!"

The rough made an attempt to raise himself, but only succeeded in writhing like a maimed snake. Badly indeed must he be wounded since he could not pass the open window."

"It will be best to call a policeman," said Allen.

The intruder, who had been looking fixedly at the old lawyer, laughed harshly.

"Better not do it, Eben Garland," he said, "or too much may be learned by it. There are some pages in your life which you don't want known."

"Your artifice won't work," said Garland, who really believed this miserable wretch incapable of mischief. "You have come here to commit robbery, or worse, and the law shall deal with you rigorously."

"In that case," retorted the man, "I shall tell the true story of the murder of Reginald Sinclair. I know where to find Tom Quain!"

His words fell forcibly on both his hearers. Allen found his suspicions confirmed; he found additional proof that the world had never known the true story of the Sinclair tragedy; and, best of all, this man asserted that he knew where Tom Quain was to be found.

On the other hand, the lawyer's leathery face had actually grown pale and he seemed a good deal alarmed.

"It is true I came here burglariously," added the unknown, as no one answered him, "but I have not gained anything by it, and have, perhaps, got my death-wound. By arresting me you can shut me up for ten years, but if I don't shut you up, too, I'm a liar. You hear me?"

"I am not a hard man and have no desire to prosecute you," said the lawyer, meekly. "I would prefer that you have a chance to repent."

The burglar laughed.

"You're a sensible man. Well, I must have a carriage and a doctor. Summon the former at once."

His commanding voice was overlooked by both his hearers, and Allen promptly stated that he would attend to that; and as a servant appeared at the door the order was given.

"Perhaps you had better go in person," said Garland; but his object was so obvious that his nephew declined.

Having formed plans of his own with which the burglar was intimately connected, he did not intend to give the crafty lawyer a chance to buy his silence.

The carriage arrived in due time and the wounded man was carried down by Allen and the servant. His hurt was one which disabled but did not place him in any danger, but it was necessary that it should be seen to at once.

Without wasting any hypocritical words, the young man kept in his company until the wound was dressed and then inquired where he wished to be left.

"What are you trying to grind?" the burglar asked, fretfully. "All this attention is not without an object."

"You are right," said Allen, coolly. "Eben Garland has directed me to see where you stop."

"I suspected the old rascal would try to play some trick upon me," was the angry reply.

"I am not particular about aiding him," said Allen, calmly. "There is little sympathy between us, and if you will answer two questions I will leave the carriage and you may go where you will, unwatched."

"What are the questions?"

"What is the true story of the Sinclair tragedy, and, where is Thomas Quain?"

Naturally, the burglar became more suspicious and declined to answer, and it was not until they had had a long conversation that he came to the conclusion that his companion was speaking truthfully. Despite his hold on Eben's fears, the man was himself thoroughly afraid of the lawyer, whom he knew to be as remorseless as he was cunning, and he was not at all sorry to help those who were working against him.

He spoke frankly at last and confessed that he knew practically nothing of the Sinclair tragedy. He had, however, once heard Tom Quain say, in his cups, that there was a mystery about the affair—one which would bring Eben Garland and Edmund Bartlett to grief if it was known.

When Allen was convinced that this was the sum and substance of his knowledge he proceeded to the second item. The burglar had boasted that he could tell where Quain was. Where, then, was he?

"At Red Bullet Bar, Colorado," was the reply. "He has a paying office there. He has a gang of road-agents under him, and all obey his orders without question."

"Does he figure under his own name?"

"No; he is known as Bullet Head; any one there can tell you all about him."

More questions Allen asked, and all were answered in a way he felt sure was frank and truthful, and then the young man came to a conclusion.

Chance had shown him the whereabouts of Thomas Quain; he would go to Red Bullet Bar and find him.

As for the burglar, it was certain he would do his best to keep out of Garland's way, and it would not be hard to blind the lawyer as to the part he, Allen, intended to play.

As the old man believed him to be his nephew there seemed to be no reason why he should suspect that the avenger was on the track.

CHAPTER X.

LILA.

WE left Bullet Head, the road-agent chief, just as he stood over his captive with a drawn knife, resolved by some freak of his somnambulistic state to deal a fatal blow; and Lila Bartlett, wrapped in a sleep no less profound remained unconscious of her danger.

In another moment the outlaw would have struck home, but something—we will not pretend to name the cause—made the girl at that instant open her eyes.

She saw that which would have startled even a stronger-nerved person; the sight of the stout man with his upraised knife sent a thrill of horror over her and shriek after shriek of terror pealed from her lips.

The first cry thoroughly aroused Bullet Head. He staggered back, the knife fell from his hand and striking point first, remained sticking in the floor; and with his hands clasped over his face he reeled back to the wall.

Here, the sharp collision swept away what remained of the cloud on his mind, but there was still a look of horror on his face as he contemplated the scene before him.

Miss Bartlett had arisen to a sitting position, from which she did not seem able to rise; and the sight of her, together with that of the knife, told everything to the somnambulist.

"Merciful Heaven! what did I try to do?"

The words fell huskily from his lips, but she did not answer. Prisoner that she was, rudely torn from her home, her situation was so full of horror that she had no words at her command. He, however, was not long in regaining a measure of his calmness.

"This is not a case where a simple request for pardon will avail anything," he then said; "but I wish to explain that I am not as bad as I seem. I am a sleep-walker, and that is why you found me here; I was wholly unconscious of my own movements. I will now retire and you shall be left alone the rest of the night; have no fear. Are you quite comfortable?"

His voice had a rough kindness which dispelled a good deal of Lila's alarm.

"How can a captive be comfortable?" she asked.

"You have not been ill used?"

"Only that I have been abducted. One cannot be contented in captivity."

"It is a necessity," he answered, hoarsely. "We cannot walk over roses all the time in this life; my own has been far from happy."

"What do you wish?" she continued. "Am I kidnapped to obtain money? If so, I beg that you will send word to my father, Mr. Bartlett, at once."

"I have already thought of that," said Bullet Head, coolly. "Believe me, I am not blind. By the way, you have a stranger stopping with you now, I believe."

From under his heavy brows the road-agent watched the girl keenly, noticing every change of her features, but he saw only a mild surprise.

"No," she answered; "there is no one there."

"But there has been lately?"

"No. No stranger has visited us for weeks."

The outlaw looked at her keenly. His knowledge of the case then engaging his attention inclined him to doubt the statement, but the eyes of the girl were so honest-looking that he wavered. He wanted to be harsh and severe with her, but those same eyes quelled his fierce spirit in spite of himself.

"Where was your father last night?" he abruptly continued.

"In his room, I suppose. I retired at nine and left him in the sitting-room."

"And you saw him no more?"

"Not until morning."

"Did you hear anything about the house—any unusual noise, after that?"

She answered in the negative, and then, as though annoyed at the questioning, curtly added:

"You seem to be very curious. I judge that you are Captain Bullet, of the road-agents. In that case, what have you to do with my father, or with his house?"

The outlaw laughed lightly.

"I knew your honored parent before you were born, young woman. We were friends, then, to a certain degree, but I don't claim the honor now. Never mind that, however. I accuse your father of having made way with a man of my acquaintance, and I wish to learn something about him—"

She interrupted with a short, unmusical laugh.

"You are a fine specimen of a preacher!" she said, sarcastically. "Better reform yourself before you turn your eloquence upon others."

"Many of us offer room for improvement," Bullet Head calmly answered. "I don't blame you for showing a little temper, in return for which forbearance you must excuse me from trying to pass as a saint."

He wheeled abruptly, at the last word, and though Lila called to him, left the room. His footfalls were heard for a moment and then all became silent.

The captive knew she had narrowly escaped a great peril, but she felt strangely calm after it. Somehow, the manner of the outlaw was not so severe as his words would indicate, and though his sudden departure had deprived her of a chance to ask information regarding her future, she felt less fear than the dreaded name of Bullet Head was supposed to create.

At the same time she was not pleased with her captivity and she would have hailed any chance to escape. She was of a naturally brave nature, and her situation had not served to decrease her energy.

She resolved to remain awake the remainder of the night, but scarcely half an hour had elapsed after Bullet Head's departure when a footstep outside the door was followed by the entrance of a man who clearly proved that she could not call herself safe while in the cave.

The intruder was of a slighter form than the outlaw chief, and Lila arose with an apprehension she would not have felt at sight of him; while the mask which covered his face was not in any degree reassuring.

He extended one hand deprecatingly.

"Pray be seated, miss," he said, politely. "In such a place as this, ceremony is not necessary. Here, in the stronghold of the mountaineers, men and women are measured by what they are rather than what they seem."

It was a somewhat singular address, under the circumstances, but plausible as was his manner Lila did not feel disposed to trust him.

"Did you come from Captain Bullet?" she asked.

"Scarcely. I am here as your friend rather than that of the notorious Bullet Head."

"Are you not of his band?"

"Yes."

"Then what—why—"

"I am here as your friend," the masked man added, with emphasis. "As a member of the band I know a good deal of the chief's affairs. You will remember how he questioned you. Well, one of his friends has disappeared, and he lays the blame at your father's door—"

"Who was his friend?" Lila interrupted, quickly.

"A stranger in this section; a man named Abram Belford," answered the mask, looking at her keenly.

Her face clouded; her disappointment was so evident that the man did not pursue the idea that was in his mind.

"Bullet Head is resolved to rescue this Belford," he continued, "and that's why he has stolen you. He swears that unless Bartlett tells where Belford is, you shall grow gray in this cave."

"I am sure my father knows nothing of Belford."

"Bullet Head believes he does."

"Why should he?"

"That's just what I want to know," said the masked man, with an emphasis which left no doubt of his sincerity. "This Belford affair seems to have upset our redoubtable chief a good bit. What is Belford to him, I wonder? This morning I heard him mutter something about righting the wrong. I judged by that he had at some time done Belford an injury, but what has your father got to do with it? What had he to do with Belford, or with Bullet Head?"

The speaker looked at Lila as though he hoped she would step forward and explain what perplexed him so much, but she did nothing of the kind.

"If you are in earnest I can tell you that you are very much mistaken," she said, indignantly. "My father has *nothing* to do with Captain Bullet; he does not associate with such men. As for this Mr. Belford, I know nothing about him."

"Enough on that head, then," the masked man said, abruptly. "Let us speak of ourselves. Listen: you wish to escape from here. Very well, I shall be delighted to aid you, but there is a condition to the affair. What have you to say?"

"I will hear you."

"You must, before going to your home, go with me to the minister's and be made my wife."

Lila recoiled at the proposal.

"Never!" she exclaimed, with emphasis; but he raised his hand before she could speak further.

"Do not decide hastily. No one will force you to a decision; you are simply given a chance between captivity and oppression on one side and liberty and the love of an honest man on the other. Wait!—hear me through. I am young, far from being ill-looking and equally far from being a ruffian. I was born and bred a gentleman and I can easily assume the old life—I have the money to back me. Speak, Miss Bartlett; what is my fate?"

There was a degree of earnestness in what he said, but Lila was far from being persuaded. She had no desire to become the wife of an outlaw, and at that moment she would have taken her chance with Bullet Head rather than with the man in the mask.

As for the latter, there was something familiar about his voice, though what it was she could not tell; to the best of her knowledge, none of her acquaintances belonged to the road-agent band.

She had been invited to speak, and she did so in a manner the man could not misunderstand. She had no wish to make him her enemy, but she plainly stated that his proposal was not agreeable and that he might as well abandon hope.

This, he was not inclined to do, and as a result he launched out on a long plea which finally became so annoying that she could bear it no longer.

"You claim to be my friend," she said, "but I am so doubtful that, unless you leave the room, I shall take measures to test your assertion. Depart, sir, or I will sound an alarm and bring Captain Bullet here!"

CHAPTER XI. THE PRISONERS.

LILA'S firm stand plainly took her visitor by surprise. For a few moments he seemed unable to speak, and when he did it was without any attempt to hide the anger she had aroused.

"Have it your own way, my fine lady!" he exclaimed, "but don't be surprised if you repent when it is too late. In this case my interests and your own are identical, and the chance to escape Bullet Head may not come again. For my own part, I will not lift a finger to aid you in the future, let your fate be what it may."

He turned on his heel at the last word, and Lila was too glad to see him go to venture a reply. He left the room, closed the door and moved the bolt, and once more she was alone.

Until then she had remained calm, but these successive intrusions had shown her how completely helpless she was and she sank upon her knees beside a chair.

"What next?" she murmured, "what next? A week ago I thought myself well protected and happy in the love of Albert Leverett, but he has gone away from Red Bullet Bar without a word of farewell and I am truly in the tigers' den. What will come of it—what will be the end?"

At the same moment her late visitor had reached another cave chamber; and once there he removed and petulantly flung aside his mask.

The act revealed the face of Lieutenant Darke, the second of the band.

"Confound the luck!" he muttered, "this little scheme is a failure; I have succeeded no better with my lady than when I wooed her with my face uncovered. It's a wonder she didn't recognize me anyway, but I did my best to disguise my voice. I don't care to have Bullet Head know the double part I am playing. One of these days I may chuck a bit of lead into

him and take command of the band myself; but not yet, not yet."

Darke spent half an hour prowling about his room and then, going to bed, finally fell asleep. The remainder of the night passed peacefully.

The following day Bullet Head was for several hours closeted with the Chinaman-prisoner, accompanied by three of his men. What passed there the band never knew, though it was said among themselves that the prisoner was being tortured to secure certain secrets which he held; but when Bullet Head emerged from the cell, the frown on his face plainly told that whatever means he had employed had not been successful.

Lieutenant Darke came to him with a swaggering manner.

"The boys have sent me to you," he said.

Bullet Head looked at him steadily, and though his mask hid his face his voice had a curt inflection at the end not to be mistaken.

"Since when did the boys become masters of their lieutenant?" he demanded.

"The day hasn't come," said Darke, flushing.

"Look to it that it don't. All men should render due respect and obedience to their superior officers, and they shall do it as long as they belong to my band. Bear this in mind!"

Darke was not dull enough to misunderstand so plain a hint, for he knew what had occasioned it.

"Your ideas are correct, captain, but, to change the subject, will you hear what the men have to say?"

"Yes."

"They are anxious for service, for booty."

"They shall have it," said the chief, tersely. "I have my plans all arranged, and I have decided to strike to-day. Last week you advocated an attack on the Metropolis mine. I'll give you half the band; come to me in the morning and say that the work is done."

Darke looked dumfounded. He had advocated a movement which he knew was foolish and rash, simply to make the men believe he was braver and more dashing than their captain, but the latter had delayed his decision and the lieutenant had not dreamed of his agreeing to it.

"I'm afraid we shall lose a good many men in the attack," he said, uneasily.

"Never mind; I rely on you to look out for that and bring my tigers back safely. You said the other day it would be easy enough. Send Sergeant Eagle to me."

At the last word Bullet Head wheeled and strode away, leaving Darke mute and motionless. He had no ambition to undertake the work laid out for him, nor could he avoid an unpleasant suspicion that his want of loyalty was suspected.

"I must go slow," he thought. "Bullet Head is a hard customer when he gets fairly a-going, and if he really gets the truth fastened on his brain he would n't hesitate to drop me in my tracks."

The day was drawing to an end when the stage from Quickstep Camp came rolling through the mountain pass on its way to Red Bullet Bar. The driver was a man who had seen a good deal of Western life, and when asked by a passenger what time they would reach the Bar, invariably replied: "At five o'clock, unless Bullet Head drops on us."

On the day in question, when he made this assertion, two of his passengers exchanged glances quickly, and when they started, one clambered to the box, and took a seat beside Mose Morehouse.

After supplying him with tobacco, he asked for more information regarding Bullet Head.

"He's a wild terror, he is," explained Mose. "Men call him ther Colorado Bravo, an' I reckon he fills ther boots. I've handled ther ribbons twenty year in ther West, an' hev see'd a good many despit charakters; but never none wuss than Bullet Head. Not that he's so very bloodthirsty, but he's got a sizable band, he kin smell gold five miles off, an' when he lights on a stage an' gits, you might as well chose a go-as-you-please flea. Yas!"

That was about all Mr. Morehouse could tell about the Bravo, except to detail the wild deeds done along the Red Bullet trail, but our travelers had a little personal experience by the way which gave them more light.

It was the story so old and often repeated in the West; the road-robbers appeared, called for a raising of hands, and soon had Mose in a position of commendable meekness.

"And I advise you ter do ther same," he added.

"Is it Bullet Head's band?" the young man asked.

"Yas."

"Then I surrender."

And when the robber chief called for an emptying of the stage, one man came out promptly, glanced at him on the box, and then stood tamely in the trail.

"Any one else in there?" demanded Bullet Head.

A man's face appeared at the window.

"I am here, ez your eyes may perceive," he observed; "but you'd better not insist on a closer intimacy. I am a hard case when I'm mad—"

"Enough!" interrupted Bullet Head. "Come out!"

"Not this week, ef I knows myself, an' I opine I do. Mebbe you've hearn ov me, too. I'm Wicked William, the raw-beef-eater. Ef any ov you want a row, come in; I'm always at hum. Ring ther bell ef you want me."

"I'll wring your neck, you idiot, if you don't come out!" exclaimed Bullet Head, impatiently.

"Don't force me to speak again."

"Gag yourself, ef you want ter; I don't keer."

"Be silent!" again ordered the road-agent. "Come out before I shoot!"

"Oh! hang your ole p^op-gun! I don't keer a straw fur it. I'm Wicked William, ther wu'st sinner in Colorado, an' when I git mad I tar b'ar. Look out fur ther engine when my bugle sounds!"

Thus far Captain Bullet had been going lightly, but the way of the speaker seemed to destroy his patience and he rode to the side of the stage with his cocked revolver ready. It was enough for Wicked William, and he came out with more haste than dignity.

"Hold on, there!" he added, "there ain't no 'arthly use o' spilin' ther vehicle; it's more emptier than my treasure pocket. I'll git out; it's puffectly fit an' proper."

No attention was vouchsafed him. The robbers went through the stage and its passengers, but without getting much booty. Bullet Head seemed disappointed; he had been informed that he would reap a goodly harvest on the road.

The result was not to his liking, and he determined to take the trio to his cave and hold them for ransom. When he announced his intention, Wicked William protested loudly, but the others heard in silence. One would almost have said they liked the turn of affairs.

The stage was allowed to go on its way and then the band wound around among the rocks on the return trip, the cave being reached in due time.

Bullet Head reflected and weighed the evidence as they went, and as a result had the two unknown men sent to his room as soon as convenient.

"What are your names?" he abruptly asked.

"I am named Birch, and my companion is Allen," the elder prisoner answered.

"What are you doing in the West?"

"Looking around—that's all."

"Then you must have funds. You have played a sharp game and traveled the road with only a few dollars in your pocket, but, fortunately, I know how to bring you to terms. I shall hold you for ransom."

The younger traveler laughed lightly.

"That is said to alarm us. What would you think, Captain Bullet, if I said we have come all the way from St. Louis on purpose to see you?"

The road-robber started, but his voice was calm as he answered:

"I suppose you are detectives."

"Nothing of the kind. We don't want to arrest you, but to ask a few questions."

The mask hid the outlaw's face, but his eyes gleamed through the openings and it was plain he was more than usually interested.

"Blaze away!" he said with unusual roughness.

"We want information in regard to the death of Reginald Sinclair, twenty years ago."

Bullet Head started to his feet abruptly, and his manner was certainly that of a badly-frightened man, but after a moment he laughed harshly and dropped back into his chair.

"The shot tells!" whispered the elder traveler to Allen—the reader has not failed to recognize the latter, or to suspect that his companion was Blenker.

The outlaw's hand trembled as it lay on the arm of his chair, but he rallied from his consternation with the quickness of one who feels himself in great danger.

"What rubbish is this?" he demanded roughly. "Who is Reginald Sinclair and what do I know about him?"

"I do not think an explanation is necessary to you, Mr. Thomas Quain," Allen coolly answered.

This time there was no start, but the road-agent stared long and earnestly. Perhaps he wanted time to think, to map out his plan for the future, but his manner was composed when he spoke again.

"What asylum had the honor of holding you before you escaped?" he demanded, sarcastically. "Your folly is not without an amusing element, but we may as well drop it."

"No doubt you so desire," said Allen, "but we are here on business and are not to be silenced so easily. We know that the real circumstances of the death of Reginald Sinclair are known to you and we want you to tell the truth. You will be judged according as you act. Help us and we will help you."

"Upon my word, you are infernal kind," Bullet Head said, with renewed sarcasm. "You talk as though you had your case all in your own hands, forgetting that you are my prisoner."

and where I can crush you at any moment. Better ask, rather than offer, terms."

"I hope you have not misunderstood me. I have only said what has gone before in kindness. I believe you can clear up the mystery of Sinclair's death, and in return we will help you. Come, sir, shall we be allies?"

Bullet Head laughed.

"Not that I am aware of. I don't know what you are talking about and don't want to. I think a few days in a dungeon will serve to clear your head."

CHAPTER XII.

BULLET HEAD MOVES FOR SAFETY.

The manner of the road-agent was becoming more aggressive, but his hearers suspected that it was because power was his, rather than because he felt at ease. His sarcasm was forced, and even in the midst of his small army and his cave he seemed ill at ease.

Allen and Blenker had journeyed all the way from St. Louis to see the man who was said to be Tom Quain. How they were to interview him they did not know until he descended on the stage; but though men less brave would have hesitated they were attending to their business in his very stronghold—attacking where they seemed likely to be only attacked.

It was not the desire of Allen to anger the mountain bravo. If the belief of the first twenty years of his life was correct, he was before his father; if his St. Louis researches were reliable, the man doubtless knew something of the death of Reginald Sinclair twenty years before.

Where the talk would have ended is uncertain. Darke, the robber lieutenant, invaded the room on business, and Bullet Head seized the chance to order his prisoners away. Allen quickly asked that a second interview might be granted them, reiterating his assertions of friendship, but they were soon out of hearing.

The chief concluded his business with Darke and then sent him away, retaining no companion except Goliath.

Bullet Head was alarmed; the Colorado Bravo, the terror of the Red Bullet trail, was strangely pale under his mask, and the hand which rested on the arm of his chair trembled like that of a woman.

"At last!" he whispered, forgetful, or regardless, of the proximity of Goliath, "at last! The day of vengeance is at hand; *they are on my trail!* This rubbish about friendship and good will won't work; these men are St. Louis detectives and they are here to drag me to the gallows. Once there my fate is sealed. The law isn't very rigid for the rich, but what can I do?"

Goliath caught the principal part of this half-spoken meditation—enough to realize that his superior had been frightened by a mental vision of a gallows, but he stood like a statue and gave no sign.

Anon, Bullet Head abruptly arose and began pacing the floor. What passed in his mind is best known to himself, but he arrived at a conclusion at last.

That decision held danger for his prisoners.

The latter had been placed in a small room very much like a prison-cell. Armed with tools they might have made their way out, but as they did not have even a knife they were helpless.

Considerable time was devoted to discussing the late interview. Bullet Head's confusion had removed the last doubt. He was Tom Quain, and he knew more about the Sinclair tragedy than was known to the world; perhaps his own hand had sent the old banker out of the world.

Time passed on until midnight drew near. To them in the cell, all hours were the same, but they estimated the time quite correctly.

"We may as well go to sleep," said the ex-detective, at last. "We shall see nothing more of the road-agents to-night, and who knows what we may encounter to-morrow?"

"Who knows what we may encounter to-night?" Allen dryly asked. "We have alarmed this Bullet Head without being able to reassure him. In St. Louis, twenty years ago, he was a garrotter, thief and other things; and in fact that he is a road-rober proves he has not reformed. Five to one he tries to kill us to-night?"

The same idea had already occurred to Blenker and he did not by any means intend to sleep.

"We want to test Mr. Tom Quain," he said, "so let us pretend to sleep and see what he will do about it. If he comes to kill us—"

"Well?"

"We must make the best of it."

Considering they were unarmed, their chances in such a case did not appear at all brilliant.

Blenker's plan of feigning sleep was agreed upon and both lay down. Allen was to watch at first while the ex-detective rested, and the latter's excellent nerves soon enabled him to fall asleep.

An hour passed. The cave was silent and dark. Allen, who had for some time listened intently became careless. His mind wandered to the drama of his life. The scenes wherein

he had learned to love Rose Jackson, the stand taken by her father, the items of evidence gathered in the case and his journey to Red Bullet Bar passed panorama-like before his mental vision.

He was at last near where lived two of the actors in the Sinclair case. Tom Quain and Bartlett were found, and his war against them would go on in earnest unless the Bravo saw fit to take matters into his own hands and spoil the vendetta.

Allen regretted, now that the mischief was done, that he had spoken to Bullet Head on the subject while in the latter's lair, but only for the untimely end of the conversation he would have made advances calculated to ease the Bravo's fears, if he held any.

The young man was still reflecting when he heard soft footsteps outside the door. He remained motionless. Then the bars of the door were carefully removed and he was not stupid enough to fail to suspect mischief.

A moment more and he was on his feet and arousing his companion. The ex-detective awoke quietly, after the fashion of his earlier days.

"I think they are coming!"

These words and no more had Allen time to speak. The door swung open, and the prisoners had a bare chance to step behind it when the unknown entered.

It required little labor to tell their character.

A bull's-eye was uncovered and two desperadoes stood looking for the supposed sleepers. Blenker touched Allen's arm and they moved together; like a pair of hungry tigers they flung themselves on the outlaws.

With so little space to cross it was not hard to secure a hold, but it was less easy to retain it. The lantern went crashing to the floor, and in a moment more two pairs of men were staggering about the room, their arms around each other and their hearts filled with enmity and anger.

Allen and Blenker fought for their lives.

The former had noticed before he moved that his man held a murderous-looking knife in his hand, and it had been a part of his work, and an attempt which succeeded well, to grasp his wrist and prevent immediate injury.

The struggle then began in earnest. In St. Louis Allen had been a somewhat noted athlete, and Blenker, though past his prime, was muscular and skillful, but in the outlaws they found opponents of no mean qualities and for a while the result seemed in doubt.

Matters ended in an unexpected way. Allen managed to throw his man, and it had hardly been done when the other two fell directly over them and the four were down in a confused mass.

A vigorous squirming ensued, and then our friends sat in triumph upon their prisoners.

Without losing any time they disarmed them, thus securing a pair of revolvers and a knife each, but in one respect they were without means.

Not so much as a shoestring was to be found with which to bind them, and it was clear they must rely on the barred door to keep them.

"We're going to leave you here," said Allen, after some thought, "and you will have a chance to raise your tuneful voices if you think proper; but it may interest you to know that if you do this we will return and blow off your heads. You hear me?"

"We ain't deaf," was the sullen answer; "but you can't skeer me. I'm Dan Northup, an' I'm a t'arer—"

"Cut it short," interrupted Blenker. "You can doubtless whip your weight in wild-cats, but my friend has shown you that a man twenty pounds lighter than you can lay you on your back."

"At any rate, you never'll git out o' the cave."

"Won't I?" demanded the ex-detective. "Don't be too sure of that, my fine fellow. Wait and see. Now we are going, but as my friend says, you must keep quiet or we'll blow you into pieces."

No reply was made, and though the manner of the man showed that they were far from being subdued, it was clear they were for the time quieted.

Our friends promptly left the cell and fastened the door behind them.

"Have you any idea where we should go?" asked Blenker.

"Not the slightest; but I believe we can get out if we don't run upon our amiable captors."

"Lead on, then."

Allen started, and they felt their way across an open space where all was intensely dark. A firm flooring of earth was under their feet, but beyond this they had no knowledge; they might be going toward liberty or into the very hands of the enemy.

Perhaps fifty yards had been thus passed when a faint gleam of light was seen in advance. Its position was such that they were not surprised to discover it to be from under a door; but it was enough to bring them to a halt.

"Whatever it is, 'tis worth looking at," said Blenker. "Very likely Bullet Head rooms inside, and by prompt work we may succeed

in taking him prisoner and carrying him to the village."

The boldness of the idea pleased Allen, and they moved forward again; but when they found that the door was strongly barred, Blenker's theory fell to the ground. Beyond a doubt it was another prison; but as its inmate would add to their strength if he could be enlisted, they decided to look inside, hoping to see Wicked William.

Allen removed the bars, opened the door a trifle and looked through. He had used all possible caution, and thought himself unheard, but as he gained a view of the interior he was undeceived.

Seated in a chair a few feet away was a young lady of singular beauty and perfect form; but all this was lost on Allen just then, for he stood stupefied at seeing a woman there.

Her gaze had been calm, almost serene, at first; but the awkward pause which followed gave her an idea, and she started to her feet and toward the door.

"Wait!" she exclaimed, as Allen showed a strong inclination to retreat. "Do not leave me until I have spoken with you. Tell me, are you of the robber band?"

It is an undisputable fact that one cannot trust to appearances, but it is just as true that Allen did not think of the fact at that moment. He saw a young girl who was the picture of innocence, and remembering the bars, at once decided that she too was a prisoner.

He was about to answer, when the more practical Blenker took matters into his own hands.

"Why do you ask, miss?" he tersely demanded.

"Because I am a prisoner, and I would bless those who rescued me."

"Where do you live?"

"At Red Bullet Bar. I was seized and borne here by that terrible robber, Bullet Head, and I fear for my life."

"Such being the case, you shall not ask in vain," the young man interrupted. "We are ourselves going to the Bar, if we can escape from here; and if you will guide us, we may be able to aid you."

"May Heaven bless you! while on my own part, I will try to give you more speedy reward by introducing you to my father. He is wealthy and influential, and if you are here on business he may be able to aid you."

It occurred to Allen that such a helper would be far from a nuisance. They were about to enter on a crusade where friends were needed, for their chief enemy could readily set the village people against them if he tried. Yes; the alliance would be very agreeable.

"We shall be glad to meet your father," he frankly said. "Pardon me, but you did not mention his name."

"It is Edmund Bartlett, and he is a mine-owner. You may have heard of him?"

CHAPTER XIII.

AN IMPORTANT STEP.

THE last words fell with startling force upon the ears of Allen and the ex-detective. Until they were spoken, neither had suspected that the girl was the daughter of the man whom they had come so far to see; and, whereas they had just begun to allow themselves to admire her, they steeled their hearts at once, remembering only that they were there as implacable seekers of justice.

If their opinion of the Sinclair tragedy was correct, Edmund Bartlett might yet be led to the gallows through their efforts.

Allen was too much confused to continue the conversation at once, and it was only through Blenker's efforts that an awkward pause was averted.

Naturally, the first impulse of each was to close the door upon the girl and leave her to her fate, which justice seemed to have ordained for the plotter's daughter; but in a short time their shrewdness came to their aid, and the same idea occurred to both.

"We waste time here," said Allen, affecting a start. "Let us get away before we are discovered; we will conduct you to Mr. Bartlett's house."

His gaze met the ex-detective's, and he seemed to mutely add:

"This chance to enter my enemy's own house is a piece of wonderfully good luck."

Blenker nodded.

"I'll lead the way. You two may follow," he tersely said.

After some deliberation on the advisability of taking the lamp, Allen hid it under his coat and they went on as fast as was safe. None of the party knew what lay before them. Perhaps they were running into the midst of the band; each moment they expected to see armed foes start up before them, and at the best they could not but expect to find a guard at the exit.

Allen found himself peculiarly placed. Miss Bartlett had thrust her little hand inside his arm, and stupid, indeed, he must have been not to see the air of confidence and trust with which she looked to him.

His own feelings were still confused, but the most prominent idea in his mind was that this

was the child of the man he suspected of causing the death of Reginald Sinclair, and, possibly, also that of Robert.

Believing this, he excused his kindness to Lila by saying internally that she must be made an instrument of his vengeance.

Blenker moved carefully, and, when the room ended, found a passage without aid from the light. Once more they went on, but only a few yards had been traversed when the leader paused.

"Some one is coming!" he said, really startled.

Allen listened. Only one person could be heard and he formed his plan quickly.

"Remain here with the lady," he said to his friend, "and let me manage this affair."

"You must not use your revolver," said Blenker, hastily, but the warning was lost as Allen glided toward the unknown.

When half the distance had been passed he extended himself at full length on the ground. The unknown advanced, nearly stumbled over him and then bent down.

"What's the matter here?" he sharply asked.

"Are you drunk?"

It was the chance for which Allen had waited and he did not neglect it. He had recognized the voice of Darke, and with the fellow's head near at hand he struck out hard and true.

The lieutenant was dashed back by the blow, and, without being able to make a movement to defend himself, he fell heavily to the ground.

In a moment more Allen stood over him, but there was no necessity for a second blow. Darke lay quite still and was harmless for the time.

A word brought Blenker forward, and the outlaw was bound with cords taken from the room where Lila had been confined.

All these delays had consumed a good deal of time and Blenker had grown impatient. He counseled haste and they moved on as before. Lila seemed unconscious of their movements and in deep thought, but it did not occur to the men that the transient light thrown on Darke's face had revealed a former lover to her.

The trio hastened on through a narrowing passage until a breath of fresh air announced the outer world. A few yards further and they were under the open sky, though still high up on the mountain side.

None of the party felt great fear of the outlaws after that. It would be hard work to find them in the rough way down the peak. An army might almost hide in the cracks and crevices.

The greatest danger, as Lila explained, lay in these very cracks and crevices; there were hundreds of places where an unwary step would send the traveler shooting downward hundreds of feet to sure death.

All these dangers must be dared, however. Blenker looked at the Heavens and urged instant action, so they went on.

Allen soon saw the need of helping Lila. The rocks pained her lightly-clad feet and she grew weary before the journey was ended. He aided her at first through policy, but her ladylike manner had made its impression before long and he almost forgot who she was.

Red Bullet Bar was reached in due time. At that hour the place was silent. It was too early for labor and the last reveler had gone to his lair.

On the way the two men had managed to talk secretly and had decided to accept Lila's offer and go to her home. It would be odd if Bartlett did not receive them kindly after what they had done, and though they hardly knew what to expect from the move, they were anxious to be domiciled under the roof.

Blenker was too old a detective not to know that chance is often one's best friend in such cases.

They proceeded at once to the house and a vigorous pounding aroused the inmates. The Chinese servants were inclined to delay, but Edmund Bartlett recognized his daughter's voice and promptly admitted them. A day's search had not sufficed to give him a clew to her fate and her return was hailed with pleasure.

Her rescuers found her very polite and grateful. He thanked them cordially and declared his desire to help them in any and all possible ways; and when, giving their names as Ralph Allen and Mr. Birch, they said they were traveling to see the country, he asked them to make his house their home for an indefinite period.

Allen wavered for a moment before this cordiality, but, remembering the work which had sent him to Colorado, steeled his heart and resolved to go on unwaveringly.

All the party were in poor condition to keep awake, and preparations were soon made for retiring. Our two friends fell asleep while discussing the situation and peace was over Red Bullet Bar.

Before joining the family the following morning the avengers talked seriously. One point had been gained and they meant to make the most of it.

"It is now clear," said Blenker, "that Bartlett and Quain are not friends, otherwise the latter would not have stolen Lila. We gave

ourselves away, as the saying goes, when talking with Bullet Head, but it is not likely the latter will warn Bartlett."

"But it is likely he will try to drop on us again."

"True, but are we afraid?"

"Scarcely. All I ask is a chance to meet the Bravo face to face where he lacks the support of his men and I will either take him to St. Louis or leave him here in a condition ill-fitted for hostile words."

"In the latter case, what would Mrs. Quain say?"

"It would be a relief. She is one of those women who will stick to a man through thick and thin, but she can't avoid a feeling of relief when the rods close over such a desperado as Tom Quain. The fact that he is at the head of the outlaws proves that he hasn't reformed a particle."

"And you really believe he isn't your father?"

"Bah! Of course he isn't. Mrs. Quain wouldn't lie, and we can fully rely on her statement."

When our friends entered the dining-room they found Bartlett absent, for he had gone out to notify the citizens in regard to what had occurred and had been detained by something, and Allen and Blenker ate with Lila and a lady she introduced as her cousin.

The latter, who lived at an adjacent town, had been summoned by the mine-owner as soon as he found his daughter missing. She was a woman of about thirty years and of a dashing style of beauty. Her name was Hester Ware.

After breakfast the quartette went to another room where they were soon joined by Bartlett. He had made arrangements for a grand outlaw-hunt for the afternoon and hoped to yet see Bullet Head ornamenting a gallows.

He did not forget to thank Allen and the ex-detective again, and it was hard to realize that he was a villain. Something soon occurred, however, which aroused him from his coolness. Lila told of her escape from the somnambulist and then added:

"He made some remarks afterward which were very odd. He seemed to be under the impression that we were entertaining a stranger here, and when I denied it he asked me several times if I had seen any such person here. He mentioned a name, but I have forgotten it entirely."

There was a renewed and instant interest on the part of each of the three men. Allen and his friend, remembering a certain enigmatical letter which was in their possession, exchanged glances and then, looking at Bartlett, were surprised to see how pale he was.

The reader who remembers the second victim of the iron vault will not be at a loss to understand his emotion. The words, indeed, showed him that the life of Albert Leverett had been sacrificed in vain; the outline, if not the minutiae of his crime was known.

As startled as Bartlett was, he soon succeeded in forcing a laugh.

"This is odd, as you say, but I explain it by supposing that he wished to draw your attention from his somnambulistic folly and talked at random."

"But he also said that he knew you before I was born," added Lila, innocently.

Once more Allen and Blenker exchanged glances, for it did not seem strange that Bullet Head, otherwise Tom Quain, should make the assertion; but Bartlett, looking anxiously and inquiringly at Allen, suddenly became paler than ever and stared as though he had seen a ghost.

CHAPTER XIV.

CLOUDS BEGIN TO GATHER.

EDMUND BARTLETT had good cause for alarm, else he would not have been affected, but neither of the two friends suspected the reason.

An awkward silence followed. Allen was tempted to step forward and say, "The name of this man who knows you is Thomas Quain," but he controlled himself and resolved to bide his time.

"This is certainly very complimentary to me," Bartlett said, rallying, "but I must deny acquaintance with Mr. Bullet Head. I know many rough fellows in Colorado, but I don't believe any of them are road-agents."

"But you were in St. Louis, at the time he claims to have known you, were you not?" Lila asked.

Bartlett replied affirmatively, though with evident annoyance, and then took matters vigorously into his own hands. He made light of the Bravo's remarks, pronouncing them wholly vague and fictitious, and declaring that money was the sole object of Lila's abduction.

His daughter was the only one who believed him. The men from St. Louis certainly could not be deceived, and Blenker noticed that Miss Ware was using her eyes to good advantage.

The ex-detective, accustomed to road-people's looks and actions, mentally decided that Miss Ware was at once a brilliant and dangerous woman.

"Allen must make love to her; that's the

only thing that can blind a woman's eyes," thought the veteran.

The idea was worthy a practical mind like his, but before he could confer with Allen he was agreeably surprised to see the lady settle down beside his friend and, as he expressed it, "carry the war into Africa," or, in other words, take the lead in the outward form of making love.

Blenker had ample food for thought. The revelation of Lila had recalled the letter appropriated in Eben Garland's house by Allen. According to that, some man whose name was not mentioned was to be lured to Red Bullet Bar and disposed of. Who it was the ex-detective did not know, but they had decided that it had no connection with the affair which had brought them to Colorado.

Now, however, he began to feel an interest in the matter. Bartlett and Bullet Head were no longer friends, yet the latter had in some way learned something about the unknown and had questioned Lila.

Beyond a doubt the man of whom he wished to know was the same that the mine-owner had referred to in his letter.

Bartlett soon went out, Lila and Miss Ware remained in the room. The latter making herself the star of the occasion. She talked rapidly and brilliantly, and Blenker, at least, seemed duly affected. He seemed to forget his gray hairs and smiled and laughed like a callow youth.

It was not until some time later that he thought prudent to suggest a walk and smoke to Allen.

They went out, and no sooner were they gone than Hester Ware abruptly left Lila and went in search of some one in the humbler portion of the house. She only stopped when she encountered Foolish Joe, the cripple.

In the mean while Allen and Blenker had gone to a cluster of bushes a few rods away, and sat down upon a rock. The elder man preferred the place to a journey around the village.

"How do you like Miss Ware?" he abruptly asked, when they had secured this position.

"She reminds me of a tigress in a playful mood," was the indifferent reply.

"How would you like her for a wife?"

"Not well enough to become your rival; I saw that you were interested," Allen retorted.

"Still, you must make love to her!"

"I?"

"Yes."

"For what reason?"

"Because she is dangerous. Sitting there today she drank in every word that was said, and whatever she may have known before, did her level best to catch the thread of everybody's remarks. I tell you she is dangerous. I am willing to admit that some women are the *ne plus ultra* of human excellence; but when one is of the tiger-cat species she will kick up a bigger unpleasantness than a million potato-bugs on an acre of land!"

The unique comparison grasped by Mr. Blenker did not hide the fact that he was in earnest, and Allen did not think of smiling.

"Do you think she is Bartlett's ally?"

"There I am at fault. Probably she is his niece, as he claims, for Lila does not deny it, and she is certainly of a different sort from her father; but if Miss Hester is not in Bartlett's confidence, she is certainly well-disposed toward him. She is keen, and suspecting something is in the wind, has decided to make love to you to get your confidence."

"And you wish me to reciprocate and beat her at her own game."

"I wish you to gain her affections, and thus disarm her. She must not go to Bartlett with any of her tales."

This point being settled, conversation turned on what Bullet Head had said to Lila. He accused her father of having made way with a friend of his. The connection between this affair and the work hinted at in Bartlett's letter to Eben Garland seemed obvious, but our friends decided that it was not a matter which interested them.

"One thing perplexes me," said Allen, after a pause. "Bartlett, while looking at me, showed a sudden and unexplained emotion. Why?"

"Have you no suspicion?"

"I suspect that if I am really the son of Robert Sinclair I may resemble my father."

"Such is my fear. I say 'fear,' because if your foe has seen the resemblance he may make matters warm for us. We should have thought of that before venturing here; I am annoyed at our carelessness."

"Let it pass; we are in Bartlett's lair, and we will try to give a good account of ourselves."

It was just as well to take this view of the case, but the fact remained that between the mine-owner and Bullet Head they were liable to get into trouble. They had seen the Bravo and told him plainly that they were interested in clearing up the mystery of the death of Reginald Sinclair.

Having quarreled with Bartlett, it was not likely he would give him any warning, but it was pretty certain that if he—Bullet Head—had

had a hand in the murder he would seize the first chance to get them out of the way.

Next, if their present host had in any way had his suspicions aroused he would be equally dangerous, but due meditation convinced them that the resemblance would not be sufficient to doom them.

Bartlett believed that Robert Sinclair's son had died twenty years before at the hand of Tom Quain, and as he did not know that he and Bullet Head were one, it was not likely he would get on the track.

They were in the midst of this conversation, cautiously carried on, when Allen heard a soft and secret movement not far away. He gave his attention to the place and became convinced that some one was playing the listener.

His plans were formed in an instant. Only prompt measures were fit for such a work as theirs, and with a light leap he bounded through the curtain of leaves and dropped full upon a crouching man.

He was a muscularly-formed fellow and the young man expected a stout resistance, but to his surprise there was none at all. His prisoner remained passively in his grasp and then a hoarse laugh broke the silence; an unnatural laugh which, taken with the face upturned to him, caused Allen to loosen his hold.

Blenker, more practical, saw a burly fellow sitting cross-legged, and though his face was certainly anything but intelligent, he was not disposed to trust blindly to appearances.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Foolish Joe, for the man was, of course, he, laughed in his usual fashion and made several gestures with his hands.

"Can't you speak?" Blenker irritably asked.

A mumble sound was the only reply and a pause followed. The idiot amused himself by trying to lift a sunbeam from the ground, while Allen and his friend looked at each other questioningly. Had this creature heard their conversation and, if so, how much of it had been intelligible to him?

If appearances were reliable he was a complete fool, but the ex-detective had seen enough of the world to be a doubter in most cases.

They reflected for some time, standing over him, but as they had a choice between accepting the situation and abruptly leaving Bartlett's, they decided to do the former.

Finding that it was impossible to get coherent or intelligible sounds from the cripple they left him in the thicket and returned to the house.

Bartlett soon came in, full of his plan for capturing Bullet Head. The man had been a scourge to the town long enough and it was time he was captured and punished.

The latter word struck somewhat forcibly on Allen's mind, and he asked what punishment would probably be meted out to him.

"Judge Lynch and the gallows will probably end his career," said the mine-owner, viciously.

The information was not in any degree pleasing, for if the outlaw was taken and executed there was little hope of ever knowing the truth concerning the death of Reginald Sinclair.

One thought was in the minds of both our friends; if the citizens triumphed over the Bravo they must themselves become Bullet Head's allies.

Bartlett's former friendly manner had returned and he invited his guests to go out with him. They went, but a slight cloud was left on Blenker's mind as, looking back, he saw Hester Ware watching them from the window.

He could not get rid of the impression that there was mischief in her brain.

As for Foolish Joe, a casual mention had led to an explanation on Bartlett's part, which convinced them that the cripple was harmless.

The outlaw-hunters had already gathered in the center of the village, and a few minutes in their company showed the detectives that they were in dead earnest. Once let Bullet Head fall into their hands and he would get a speedy send-off to the undeveloped future.

And in this spirit the party left the village.

CHAPTER XV.

MIDNIGHT WANDERINGS.

THE hunt for Captain Bullet was a failure, just as the more sensible of the villagers had expected it would be. They had sought for the Bravo before, and always unsuccessfully, and it was not to be expected that he would come out and deliver himself up.

There were at least two men in Red Bullet Bar who rejoiced at the result; Allen and Blenker were glad that the outlaw had kept out of sight and relieved them from the trouble of risking their own lives for him.

According to their view of the case, he belonged to them without reservation.

Bartlett appeared uneasy during the evening and would often sink into thoughtful moods and leave the conversation to the other members of the family-circle, but his cordiality to his guests did not waver.

They had championed his daughter's cause and must be rewarded practically. Since they did not need money, he could, at least, give them shelter.

On their own part they held a long conversation after retiring, the result of which was that

they decided they must trap Bullet Head unaided, for he alone could give the information they desired.

There seemed little chance to learn anything at Bartlett's; his household seemed of the ordinary kind, and they must await the revelation of Thomas Quain before striking a blow at the chief villain.

Blenker fell asleep soon after retiring, but not many hours had elapsed when he was aroused by Allen.

"Lie still and listen!" said the latter, abruptly.

The ex-detective had good nerves and was able to obey without delay or question; but when he heard low moans which seemed to proceed from directly outside their room he unclosed his lips.

"Is some one sick?" he asked.

"Just what I would like to know. These moans sound regularly and I have twice opened my door to learn whence they come. The whole house is dark and the people seem to be fast asleep."

Blenker quietly arose and started a light.

"Those moans are human and made by some one in pain," he said. "I am going to look into it."

He opened the door in turn. The hall was dark and silent, and the moans then seemed to arise from the lower floor. He walked along the hall and down the stairs, but returned in a minute or so, his expression less placid than usual.

"No one astir in or around the kitchen," he abruptly said; "but the case gains rather than loses interest. Dress fully and let us investigate."

"Speak plainly; what do you suspect?"

"Directly under us," resumed Blenker, "are the kitchen-rooms, but the Chinese servants sleep some distance away, as also do the members of the family. These groans do not proceed from them. From whom, then?"

The two men made an impressive picture just then. Allen had finished dressing and had drawn a revolver, while his friend, with the light advanced, looked as severe of countenance as the traditional stage-detective.

"From the man who was to be lured here, according to the letter from Bartlett to Eben Garland," hazarded Allen.

"Exactly!" said Blenker, triumphantly. "This mysterious person, whoever he is, is a prisoner in this very house. Do you remember that the letter said he was to be confined in a secret place near the cellar? That's where the groans come from, and we may now see him."

"Lead on!" Allen tersely said.

No more time was lost. Both men left the room and cautiously descended the stairs. Neither was over-confident. Knowing what they did of Bartlett, it would not have surprised them to find a spy observing their movements, but they were resolved to make the best of it.

Once in the kitchen, they paused to listen. The moaning had ceased and the house was silent. They examined the various rooms in that part of the house, but there was no sign of a mysterious captive.

They had paused for consultation when there was a renewal of the groans, but this time faint and almost inaudible. It was, however, enough to direct their search and the ex-detective pointed one finger downward.

"The cellar!" he said, briefly.

No more was necessary. They descended an ordinary stairway and reached a subterranean depository of vegetables and other articles, but no human being was to be found. All had become silent again, and though they waited for some time, the moans were not repeated.

"I can't understand it," said Blenker. "Such sounds must have human origin, and human beings can't melt into thin air. I see no reason to believe a prisoner is confined here, but I would like to know who groaned."

Allen suggested that they go out for fresh air. The affair reminded him of some of the wild ghost-stories he had heard in his youth and he wished to see the open sky above him.

They went out and made a circuit of the house. All was as usual and the Bar gave forth no sound of revelry. There seemed no way to account for the late sounds.

They were standing near one side of the house, both wrapped in thought, when Allen listlessly saw a dark object crossing the open space which ended at the bushes before mentioned. At first it seemed to be no more than a wolf, but a closer survey showed it to be a man creeping on his hands and knees.

Struck by the circumstance, which seemed strange, untimely and suspicious, he called Blenker's attention, but the latter was only in time to get a vague view.

"Let us go to the bushes," Allen abruptly advised.

"And run into a nest of road-agents? It is my opinion that Bullet Head is preparing to return the visit of the villagers and recapture Lila."

The suspicion looked reasonable, but when it suddenly occurred to Allen that the creeper was Foolish Joe the ex-detective hesitated no

longer. They secretly made their way to the trees.

Through the wooded spot ran a road, and as they reached it the moon suddenly emerged from behind a cloud, making it dangerous to cross. Up to that time they had seen nothing of the creeper, but Blenker suddenly laid his hand on Allen's arm.

If the moon had prevented their further advance, it did them a favor in return. Just beyond the road, half-revealed in the light and half-concealed by the shadows, were a man and woman who stood side by side.

Neither of the observers was at a loss to recognize her; it was Lila Bartlett. About the man's identity all was uncertainty, but it was clear that the discussion was not wholly amicable. The girl gave repeated evidence of doubt, fear and anger, and once or twice her voice was lifted so that they distinguished its angry inflection without being able to hear the words.

The watchers were surprised afresh. Lila had seemed to be on good terms with her father and there appeared to be no reason why she should meet any one secretly, but why should she go out at midnight to meet a man evidently her enemy?

While Allen was wondering over all this the ex-detective was using his eyes and he suddenly whispered:

"Look at the tree above them!"

Allen obeyed and saw a huge, dark object which hung like a monkey from a large limb. Puzzled for a moment, he was not long in recognizing Foolish Joe, and with the discovery came a doubt regarding the fellow's weakness of mind. He certainly did not act like an idiot at that moment.

"Miss Lila has her secret," whispered Blenker, "which is not odd when she has such a father, but I fear she won't keep it long. That ugly imp above them is listening and you may be sure he will tell old Bartlett."

"This same imp, as you call him, also overheard our talk, or we supposed him near enough to hear. If he is less a fool than he appears to be, we had better look out for Bartlett ourselves."

They were about to attempt to cross the road when Lila and the man reappeared. The latter was now more distinctly visible. He was short and powerfully made, but, as before, his face was hid in shadow.

The affair perplexed our friends, who, in their earnestness, forgot that this was an affair which probably interested Lila alone. The man spoke earnestly and rapidly for several minutes, unconscious of the dark object which swayed from the branch above, but Foolish Joe, if it was indeed he, seemed to hang as easily as though a part of the tree.

At last Lila and the man shook hands, as though in farewell, and Allen leaned toward Blenker.

"They must be watched. Look to the girl, yourself, and I'll hie the unknown."

The ex-detective did not object and Allen ventured to cross the road. He soon saw Lila start for the house and looked with renewed interest for his man.

He was not long delayed; the stout man left the trees and started, as it at first seemed, for the village, but as he neared it he bore more to the right and passed by.

The moon had again disappeared behind heavy clouds and Allen had no trouble in following without running great risk of discovery. He went on until the mountain was nearer than the village and he began to have a vague suspicion which lacked probability.

Yet, the unknown did not once swerve from his way. He reached the mountain and began the ascent. A half-hour of vigorous climbing followed. Allen, unaccustomed to such exercise, breathed hard and could hardly keep near his quarry.

At last the latter entered a miniature canyon where the shadows hung deeply. Allen glided cautiously along in pursuit but failed to keep sight of him. The moon came out once more, lighting all places except these cuts in the mountain, and as the young man reached the further end of the canyon he suddenly paused.

The man he had followed had disappeared; beyond a doubt he had made use of the dark gully to throw his pursuer off the track.

Convinced of this the latter retraced his steps and looked anxiously, but vainly, for the unknown. He had gone and left no sign.

Giving it up at last, Allen looked more carefully to his surroundings and was sure he was near where he and his friends had emerged from the cave when they made their escape; and he looked to his weapons and used more care. He had no desire to be recaptured.

CHAPTER XVI.

PLOTS AND COUNTERPLOTS.

ALLEN could not very well avoid one suspicion when he had meditated a short time. The man he had followed had come straight to the mountain, and was, beyond doubt, one of the robber band. And Lila Bartlett had held an interview with him at midnight!

This fact was a surprising one, and the evi-

dent unpleasantness of their meeting did not render it less perplexing.

Why should she meet such a man secretly and at such an hour?

These questions were so hard to answer, that Allen began to wonder if her captivity had not been a sham. At one time he had been disposed to regard her well, but time was teaching him that the Bartlett household was one of mystery from Edmund down to Foolish Joe.

Without much further delay, Allen left the mountain and hastened toward his quarters. He had expected to find Blenker in his room, having tired of waiting; but he was outside and watching patiently.

Confidences were soon exchanged, though the ex-detective could only say that Lila had at once returned to the house.

"The mystery deepens," he acknowledged; "for I will confess I can't understand this last affair. Lila Bartlett is of a different piece than her father; and if she didn't want to see this man, she made a sacrifice to meet him."

"But I can't see why she should meet one of Bullet Head's men."

"I strongly suspect that Quain is playing some game on Bartlett. We know they are not friends, and it wouldn't be odd if the girl has caught the idea, and is willing to make some sacrifice in the case."

"Whatever is on her mind, she must look out or there will be trouble in the camp. You remember how Foolish Joe hung from the limb while they talked? I suspect that fellow—I believe he is a fraud."

"You think he is less a fool than he seems?"

"I do; and I also believe that he can talk—at least, with Edmund Bartlett."

"And the groans we heard!" continued the ex-detective, thoughtfully.

"You have me there. Our thorough search failed to discover anything, however, and I am more than half-inclined to think we were deceived by the wind."

"On an almost breathless night?"

"I won't argue the point. But what is your view?"

"I am almost inclined to think a second cellar exists, and that Bartlett has a prisoner there. If such a course would not endanger our own affair, I would suggest that we use a spade a little."

Allen did not answer, and in a short time the two went to bed to get some rest, and a good many wild dreams.

At the breakfast-table all was as usual. All the members of the family were there; none mentioned having been ill—even Lila was calm and fresh, her pretty face giving no sign that she had lost an amount of sleep at midnight.

During the meal Bartlett suggested that his guests make a full examination of his mine, an invitation they did not think best to decline; but when he had once arranged matters, Bartlett added that he would be busy himself, but would give them in charge of his superintendent.

This arrangement was carried out, and once alone the rich man went to the telegraph office, and sent this message:

"There is a man here who looks like him! Can it be possible?"

This dispatch was addressed to Eben Garland, St. Louis, and the answer came more promptly than Bartlett expected. This is what Garland replied:

"It is possible, and I have reason to believe it may be true. I know Tom played us false. New developments. I am on my way to your town."

The mine-owner had the reputation of being a very cool man; but he stared at this message as though he had seen a ghost. An uneasy suspicion had been in his mind, but when he telegraphed to Garland he had flattered himself the answer would quell all his fears.

The result had been just the contrary. Garland, whom he knew to be a cautious, slow-going and cunning man, had admitted that there was danger; he had said that they had been played false, and that he was *en route* for Red Bullet Bar; but the message was alarming without being plain.

Being vague, Bartlett naturally translated it in keeping with his fears, and when he went out his face was paler than any Red-Barite had ever seen it before.

He saw danger looming up before him, and with the energy of an impulsive nature, he resolved to at once take steps for his safety. Had Eben Garland been there to help him he would not have proceeded as he did, for the lawyer was always cold and meditative.

Bartlett wanted the services of an unscrupulous man. Such persons were common in Red Bullet Bar; but he knew of one who he believed would answer his purpose better than any other, for the reason that he had plenty of brains to make amends for a lack of conscience.

For a common rascal, he need not have gone further than the Chinamen who lived with him.

When he stopped it was at a hut near the outskirts of the village. Twice he rapped vainly at the door, but at the third summons there was a fumbling inside, and it swung open. A

tall, handsome young fellow became visible, who at once invited him to enter.

Bartlett obeyed, and found himself in an unfurnished space, but half of the hut was curtained off by a red blanket.

"Replace your bar, if you wish, Crisp," he said, familiarly. "I know you are playing cards behind that curtain, but I'm not here to act the spy. Put up your bar, my good man!"

His manner brought a gleam of suspicion to the face of the young man, and he gained a little time by replacing the bar before answering.

"You're entirely wrong, Mr. Bartlett," he then said, humbly. "I've turned over a new leaf, and am trying to do what's right. I hope people don't think I am living as a gambler?"

"I haven't heard any one say so, and I certainly don't care if you are. Did I speak against you when you were so nearly hanged a year ago?"

"No," answered Crisp, but his averted face concealed a glow of hatred; he knew more than Bartlett supposed; he knew that but for his present visitor he would never have been under a ban at the Bar.

"Very good. Now, I have business with you. When can we talk privately?"

"Now." As Crisp answered he flung aside the blanket, but his visitor paused abruptly as he saw a burly fellow sitting at the table and slowly sipping his glass of liquor.

"I mean without witnesses," he curtly added.

"You need have no fear of this man, who is very discreet, but if you say so—" The man at the table arose and bowed low.

"Thar hain't no 'arthly reason why you should bridle yer tongue 'round hyar," he observed. "I'm ther friend o' them as has private work ter do, an' I never peach. I'm Wicked William, ther champion cut-throat o' Colorado. I'm a ruffyan without a conscience!"

The speaker scowled ferociously, but Crisp looked annoyed. Bartlett, on the contrary, seemed interested at once.

"Wicked William?" he repeated. "Wasn't you captured by Bullet Head, the other day, when he dropped on the stage?"

"Identically, sir, identically. I'm that same pilgrim."

"How did you escape?"

"Cut my dimensions through ther inemy an' cantered out. Blood flowed freely, but hyar I am, your honor."

"Did you have any talk with the other men taken at the same time—with Allen and Birch?"

"I did that, an' they sorter looked ter me fur advice. They see'd that I was a cut-throat an' well posted in Colorado ways an' places. Their way was pfectly fit an' proper."

"No pride about them?"

"Not a bit."

"I've changed my mind," said Bartlett, looking at Crisp. "You needn't send this gentleman out; on the contrary, I think I may employ him if he can be hired."

"Ef you want a bullet or knife sent home, call on me. I'm a infidel an' a stalwart villyon. Give me a dollar an' I'll cut my dimensions anywhar!"

Wicked William's boastful manner seemed to please the mine-owner, but he did not depend on mere words. The boaster seemed to be a typical rough. He was brawny, scarred and coarse; his hair and beard were long and tangled; his face was marked by intemperance, and he carried his rags and dirt with conscious pride.

The visitor drew Crisp to one side.

"You once desired my daughter for your wife," he said.

"Yes," the young man stammered.

"Do you still wish it?"

"Yes."

"She is yours!"

Crisp stared for a moment in astonished silence.

"She wouldn't so much as use me for a doormat," he then replied.

"Then, why not abduct her?"

The strange question caused Crisp fresh astonishment, but in a moment more a flush crept into his face.

"You are trying to get me into a trap!" he declared, with angry emphasis.

"Softly, softly! You are entirely wrong. Whatever you do, if you act on my suggestion, will be by my advice, but I am not sure that I wish it. My affairs are a little embarrassed just now, and I may want you to steal Lila and marry her."

"Why, she hates the sight of me."

"Possible?"

"And has another lover."

"Who?"

"Albert Leverett, the carpenter."

Bartlett started, in spite of his natural coolness, but in a moment more he was as cool as ever. He assured Crisp that she had dismissed Leverett, who had left the vicinity, and then, growing bolder, he stated that he wished to employ both Crisp and Wicked William, if the latter was trustworthy. Him, Bartlett intended to introduce into his family to learn certain secrets which he believed were possessed by his present guests, while Crisp was to hold himself

ready to abduct Lila in case he was so directed.

The young man was surprised and bewildered by all this, for he could not imagine why the old man should want his daughter abducted, but at the same time the proposal delighted him.

He wished to marry Lila, and it was a curious coincidence that at the time Bartlett rapped, he and Wicked William were discussing how the latter could best be introduced into Bartlett's house as a spy.

CHAPTER XVII.

A TRIANGULAR SCHEME.

THE man whom Bartlett addressed as Crisp was none other than Darke, the lieutenant of Bullet Head's band. As we have seen, the officer had certain schemes in his mind which he would not have wished his superior to know. He was infatuated with Lila Bartlett, and he had offered her freedom, it will be remembered, on condition that she promised to marry him; an offer she promptly declined.

Bullet Head, on his part, seemed a good deal worried by the subsequent escape of Allen and the ex-detective, and the fact that they had taken up their residence with Bartlett. This surprised Darke, but will be more easily understood by the reader who remembers the warning injudiciously given the Bravo.

As a result, the latter had a long talk with Wicked William, who remained in his hands, and then called Darke.

"Conduct this man to the Bar," said his superior, "and let it be understood that he escaped us. It is my wish that he go to Edmund Bartlett's and again become the companion of our late prisoners."

No further explanation was given Darke, but once in the cabin he proceeded to pump the "champion cut-throat." Wicked William talked cheerfully; the real object of his errand was to watch Bartlett and learn all he could about him.

Thus it was that the arrival of the mine-owner was deemed so timely, and that Crisp, alias Darke, was so ready to aid in the scheme, though he could not imagine what complication could occur which should make Bartlett desire Lila abducted as suggested.

The mine-owner soon transferred his attention to Wicked William, who had settled down to work on a short, black pipe.

"Do you want to earn some money?" he abruptly asked.

"You kin bet on't."

"Very well, unless you are attached to Allen and Birch I can give you the chance."

"Money is stronger'n attachments. I'm no fool. When I see a chance ter make a dollar I go fur it, I do. Whose throat is in need o' artificial air?"

The coarse brutality of his manner removed Bartlett's last doubt, and he explained that he believed Allen and his companion were in Colorado for no good; that is, no good for men that wanted to get an *honest* living easily.

Wicked William understood the allusion and bluffly announced that he was ready to end their meddling. He sharpened his knife on his boot-leg and looked ferocious enough to suit even the schemer; but when he was told that he must wait for a while and lull the men's suspicions while he extracted their secret, he agreed to do it.

The bargain thus formed, Bartlett took his leave with the understanding that his man was to follow soon after and appear at his house as though he had just escaped.

The plan was carried out to such an extent that Mr. Crisp was soon left alone. He at once indulged in a dance as a means of showing his exultation.

"I reckon this case is bound to be the making of me, complicated as it now is. Wicked William is the tool of a variety of men. Bullet Head has a use for him and so has Edmund Bartlett, Esq., but if your humble servant don't find a way to stir the caldron and cook his own broth I am a liar. This Wicked William is only a vain boaster, and by outbidding his other employers I shall myself become the first possessor of the secret. Why the dickens are Allen and Birch here, anyway? Mr. Crisp Darke, now is the time for you to feather your nest!"

Leaving the lieutenant indulging in these sanguine dreams, let us return to Bartlett's house.

When Allen and the ex-detective returned to the house they found Bartlett already there, and it was not long before Wicked William was seen serenely swaggering up the walk. His sometime fellow-prisoners were surprised to see him, but they at once explained his identity to the mine-owner who declared that he was welcome.

Wicked William made himself at home. He calmly occupied three chairs and his big voice was like the tone of an organ of generous dimensions. With his hair and beard in hopeless confusion, and his newly-acquired weapons fully exposed, he looked like a wild man of the woods or a porcupine ready to repel an attack.

He explained how he had escaped from the

cave as glibly as though he had been telling the truth, but when he was eagerly asked if he could guide a party back there his pompous manner vanished.

It was a peculiarity of the cave that those who came out could never find their way back unaided.

Thus, this dubious character became an inmate of the mine-owner's house, where he at once made two enemies. His manner disgusted both Lila and Miss Ware. He put peace and quiet to flight, smoked in the parlor and carried a whisky-flask constantly in his pocket; in fact, he seemed a perfect specimen of a Western desperado on semi-good behavior.

Lila asked her father why he harbored such a man, and his reply was unsatisfactory, but Hester Ware took a different way in getting at the information she wanted.

"Uncle Edmund," she said, abruptly, when alone with him, "what game are you playing?"

He looked at her in evident astonishment.

"Wicked William and I have just indulged in draw poker," he said, after a pause.

"Nonsense! I don't mean that kind of a game. My dear sir, do you think I am blind? Ease your mind on that point. You have three guests here and none of them are welcome. Allen and Birch you hate; I strongly suspect you fear them. That swaggering ruffian, Wicked William, is here because you have a use for him. I ask you again, what game are you playing?"

Bartlett attempted to laugh down the idea, but Miss Ware was not to be thrown off the track. She gave substantial reasons for her suspicions until he was aroused from his indifference.

"She is shrewd and, I suspect, little troubled with a conscience; I will range her on my side before she takes the other." Then he added, aloud: "For my part, I have no game to play, but I suspect one is being worked against me. The signs you mention are defensive, not offensive, ones."

Miss Ware hesitated for a moment. She was convinced that he did not intend to divulge; if she learned the secret, it must be through other means.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

It was Bartlett's turn to hesitate. Experience had told him that confederates were not desirable articles, but it is better to silence a suspicious person than to let vague ideas reach the whole world.

"You may make love to young Allen, if you will," he abruptly said.

Hester laughed.

"A pleasant task, really."

"With a view to making him talk," he added. "You are shrewd and ought to be persuasive. Try to find out what brought him to Colorado."

Hester agreed, though this result was far from what she had hoped for. As far as her directions went, they embraced nothing new. She had already gotten up quite a desperate flirtation with Allen, hoping to win his confidence, but he did not yield to her charms in a satisfactory degree.

Really, the young man was beginning to grow uneasy. His residence under Bartlett's roof was unpleasant and did not seem likely to present any good results. Some slightly suspicious things had been observed there, but nothing which he could assert was out of the way; he was not prepared to say that the household was any different, or any more blamable, than hundreds of others about him.

On their way back from the mine he had said to the ex-detective:

"We are wasting time; our only hope is to capture Tom Quain, alias Bullet Head."

"Then let us seek for him to-night," said Blenker, calmly.

Thus it was that, after pretending to retire for the night, they secretly left Bartlett's and started for the mountain. They went well armed, and as the moon would soon be up they entertained some hope of being able to enter the cave and find the Bravo.

The mountain was reached, ascended, and the search began. The full moon sent a flood of light upon the scene, but in such a way as to be of no use. The higher ground was vividly lighted and in many places glowed whitely, but all this only served to make the canyons and ravines, to which the moon could not penetrate, seem all the darker.

It was not the first time that men had searched for the entrance to Bullet Head's cave, as will be remembered, but the result was the same as usual. The wildness of the place, the unsystematic formation of everything, rendered the locality almost a labyrinth, and on this occasion the two men were unable to find the place through which they had emerged.

Thoroughly tired, at last they sat down on a boulder and began fanning themselves with their hats. It was at this moment that a voice propounded an unexpected question.

"Won't you smoke a cigar while you wait, gentlemen?"

Both sprung abruptly to their feet. They flashed quick glances about in search of the

speaker, but the character of the miniature canyon had rendered the voice unplaceable.

"Look this way!" repeated the voice.

This time they were less at fault and glanced upward, and there, half-way up the cliff, a man lay on a shelf of rock where the moonlight fell full upon him.

With his head resting on one hand, and his legs outstretched, his manner was so cool and indolent that the two men could only look in silence.

"Were you hunting for Bullet Head?" he continued.

Allen aroused. He believed he recognized the same voice that had addressed him in the cave, and he resolved that if the redoubtable Bravo was indeed at hand he should not escape.

"We were looking for him, and we have found him," he said, quickly raising his revolver. "Don't dare to stir from where you are; you are my prisoner!"

"Is that a fact?" was the cool inquiry. "I would never have suspected it. How and when was I captured?"

"Words are unnecessary in this case," Allen curtly declared. "You are Bullet Head, and as we have been searching for you, we shall not let this chance pass. Descend and yield yourself a prisoner!"

"Just as you say," was the lazy reply, "but before I obey I must ask you to look around you. Perhaps you will see something of importance."

Blenker, who had mistrusted this scene, had not failed to give prompt obedience, and as he looked he suddenly grasped Allen's arm.

"We are in a trap!" he hissed. "We are surrounded by the road-agents. Look for yourself!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MYSTERIOUS ROBBER.

One glance was enough to show Allen that the ex-detective had made no mistake. Dim as was the light in the canyon, it was sufficient to show a double line of men by which they were hemmed in, and every one carried a rifle.

"You see," added Bullet Head, coolly, "that the case is all in my own hands. You came to seek, and you have found; while, if the circumstances are not to your liking, it may interest you a bit to know that I mean you, as well as you mean me."

"Come down and see us, then," said Allen, quickly, deciding to make the best of the situation.

"I'll do it."

Without further loss of time, the Bravo arose and vanished in the deeper shadows. He was still to be heard, and they knew he was toiling down an invisible pathway.

"Are we doomed to another term in the cave?" Allen muttered, addressing Blenker.

"It looks that way. It's certain we are in the grasp of these fellows—irrevocably so; and our only hope is to drift with the current, and hope for the best."

Allen was very reluctant to acknowledge that their situation was so desperate; and, with the fire of youth, he considered the chances of resistance, but even he was obliged to admit that it would be folly.

The Bravo, having descended the cliff, promptly advanced toward the entrapped men, his face covered by a mask, as usual.

"I am ready to receive you in the cave," he said.

"We did not come here with an ambition to be a prisoner," said Blenker, dryly.

"I suppose you wanted to capture me?"

"We wanted a talk with you."

"Well, I won't disappoint you. The talk shall come off. This, however, is scarcely the place for a council, so we will go inside. When we are through, you can return to Red Bullet Bar unhindered by me."

Neither of his hearers placed much confidence in the promise; but as they were so completely in his power, Allen agreed without hesitation—it was best to accept coolly what could not be avoided.

Acting on this rule, they made no opposition when the Bravo added that, though they would be allowed to keep their arms, he must bandage their eyes before entering.

In this fashion, but with many a perplexing turn, they were conducted inside; and when their eyes were uncovered, they were in Bullet Head's private room.

He motioned them to be seated, passed a box of his cigars, and then settled down in his own chair.

Allen and Blenker were filled with surprise, while even Goliath, the giant servant, seemed stirred out of his usual stoical manner.

"Well," said the outlaw, "let us now proceed to business. You came here to see me—why?"

"We want a frank talk. We came to Colorado on purpose to see you."

"The blazes you did! Well, what for?"

"First, are we right in believing your name to be Thomas Quain?"

"I should be a fool to admit it, but I will

make no denial. Proceed the same as though you knew it to be a fact."

This was equivalent to a confession, for why should the outlaw say he would be a fool to admit it unless he was acquainted with Quain's evil record.

"Well, to come right to the point, we think you can throw some light on the death of Reginald Sinclair."

"I thought that was settled twenty years ago."

"So it was, after a fashion, but we do not feel satisfied with it. Thomas Quain, to speak plainly, I am the child that you bore to your house the night when your own one died."

"Ah!"

Bullet Head had started slightly; he showed an interest not before visible.

"Yes, I am he who has been known as Allen Quain, the nephew of Eben Garland, and the supposed son of Thomas and Mabel Quain."

The smoke no longer puffed from behind the Bravo's mask, but his face could not be read.

"The supposed son," he said, slowly. "If you are no more than that, who, in reality, are you?"

"That is just what I wish to know. One stormy night, twenty years ago, you entered your house with a child in your arms. Mabel, your wife, informed you that your son, and hers, had died during your absence, and for a while you were so angry that you raged like a pirate. You had relied on the child to inherit the fortune of Eben Garland, and you felt sure he would not leave a cent to you or your wife. However, you had a happy thought, and as a result you substituted the child in your arms—myself—for your own, and no one suspected the fraud."

"Who told you this?" Bullet Head harshly asked.

"Mabel Quain."

"And who was the child carried to the house?"

"That is what you should best know, but what I wish to learn. Where did you get the child, and who was it?"

A silence ensued. Bullet Head did not answer, but his keen eyes could be seen through the holes in his mask as he gazed at his companions, and Blenker, accustomed to read signs, saw that his hands trembled.

"He sees the shadow of the gallows!" thought the ex-detective.

"What do you mean by all this rubbish?" the Bravo suddenly burst forth, in an angry voice.

"Why do you call it rubbish?" Allen asked.

"Because it is nothing but a fiction."

"Do you still claim me for your son?"

"My son? Bah! I am not Thomas Quain! My son! I have no such thing. I am an Englishman by birth; I have been but a year in this country and I know nothing of all your Quains and Garlands and Sinclairs. Bah! your lies won't deceive me, and, by my life, you don't leave this cave until you tell the truth. I'll have it out of you if I torture you to get it!"

The Bravo had leaped to his feet and these words were poured forth rapidly and fiercely; but though his hearers could not avoid a degree of alarm it was a moment of triumph.

His emotion proved that the shot had gone home.

"This man can tell us how Reginald Sinclair died!" thought Blenker. "I only fear that he, himself, dealt the fatal blow, in which case it will be hard to make him confess. The promise of a full pardon will hardly tempt a man who is ruler of such a band as this."

Aloud, he calmly said:

"We can prove all we have asserted, Mr. Quain, and what we want of you is to know just who the babe was whom you brought to the house that night. My young friend here, is naturally anxious to know his own name."

"A short time ago your chief desire was to know something about one Reginald Sinclair."

"True."

"What has that to do with the present case?"

"Again we answer, that is just what we wish to know. Can you inform us?"

"Why do you connect them?" harshly asked the outlaw.

"Simply," answered Blenker in a deep voice, "because we believe the child of whom we have spoken was the son of Robert Sinclair."

Bullet Head dropped back into his chair. The ex-detective would have given much at that moment to see his face, but though it was hidden by his mask he could not conceal his agitation.

"To the man who can tell us the truth of this affair we will do our utmost to give a full and lawful pardon for all past misdemeanors," added Allen.

The Bravo's hand was clinched tightly around the arm of his chair, but his voice seemed to gain strength and clearness.

"A generous offer, upon my word!"

"And one made to you."

"To me?"

"Yes."

"What do I know of the matter?"

"You are Thomas Quain and you know the real parentage of this young man whom you have presented to the world as your son, and

you were the ally of Edmund Bartlett and Eben Garland in the plot which cost the Sinclairs, Robert and Reginald, their lives. I believe, however, that you were the lesser villain, and that is why you are offered a chance to save yourself by telling the truth, however compromising that truth may be to your safety."

The ex-detective presented this *resume* of the case with the deliberation of a judge delivering his charge to a jury. Thus, Bullet Head was able to digest every word as he went along and make reply without delay.

"And was it for this you came to Colorado?"

"Yes."

"To prove the parentage of this young man?"

"Yes, and to overwhelm Edmund Bartlett if, as we suspect, he was the cause of Reginald Sinclair's death."

"Why do you suspect this?" the Bravo imperiously asked.

"Who was the gainer by the murder if not Bartlett? Who was it came to your house the day after the crime to ask if you had kept your promise and thrown a certain babe into the Mississippi, if not Bartlett? What babe would he naturally want out of the way if not Robert Sinclair's?"

"Can you prove that Bartlett asked any such question of me?" Bullet Head demanded.

"Your wife, Mrs. Quain, will swear to it."

"Now," added Allen, "it is for you to add your voice to hers and clear an innocent man. Robert Sinclair has long enough rested under a brand of crime, and Bartlett has long enough profited by his ill-gotten wealth."

The words were spoken with the enthusiasm of youth, and Bullet Head gazed fixedly; his expression was lost behind the mask.

"Robert Sinclair is dead," he said, harshly.

"So the world supposes; it is not sure."

"And you claim to be his son?"

"I believe it, but the proof lies with you."

The Bravo remained motionless for a moment, and then his hands dropped to his side.

"I can prove nothing!" he sharply said.

"Think again—" began the ex-detective, persuasively; but Bullet Head arose abruptly and interrupted him.

"Enough!" he said, in his former manner. "I have now learned what brought you to Red Bullet Bar, and I shall use the knowledge as I see fit. How that will be I cannot say just now; perhaps it will be to your good, perhaps to your ill. I will say, however, that I am no friend of Edmund Bartlett, and I believe he is a bitter enemy of the Sinclairs. Let this suffice for now."

CHAPTER XIX.

BULLET HEAD'S TREACHERY.

At the last word the Bravo made a signal to Goliath, who uttered a soft whistle, and in half a minute four outlaws entered the room.

"These men will escort you out," Bullet Head added, "and you can return to the village. If you want to know whether I am your friend or foe, come forty-eight hours later to the canyon where you saw me to-night. I promise you safety, if nothing more."

"Why not give your answer now—" Allen began; but the outlaw stamped his foot to interrupt him.

"Because I do not choose to. Be satisfied if you are allowed to live, which is a weakness on my part. Take them away!"

The latter order was addressed to his men, and they hustled the visitors away with a roughness which showed they were in accord with their leader's harshest orders. Blenker had given his young friend a warning look, and they made no remonstrances whatever.

When the bandages had been applied to their eyes they were led out and along winding ways. Finally the party paused, ostensibly for one of the party to light his pipe, but as several minutes passed in utter silence, Allen gained a suspicion and removed his bandage.

They were alone in a dark canyon; the lighting of the pipe had been but an artifice for the road-agents to glide away.

Satisfied that this was so, they decided to return to the village at once. Allen was disposed to regard Bullet Head with extreme bitterness, but Blenker looked at the matter with the moderation of his age, and frankly confessed that he did not expect any more.

"Tom Quain has had such a life that I don't wonder he is reluctant to show his hand. Were he to step into St. Louis to-day and say to the mayor, 'I am Quain,' he would hang higher than Haman. Therefore, give him time and let us get to shelter. We're going to have the biggest rain on record."

Judging by the thunder his prophecy seemed quite reasonable. One incessant boom seemed to fall upon their ears, the lightning was vivid and the darkness, so suddenly succeeding the moonlight, impenetrable.

"We must take advantage of the lightning flashes and hasten to the village," added Blenker as Allen hesitated.

"I doubt the wisdom of such a course," the latter answered. "I fear a blizzard, tornado or hurricane, whichever you see fit to call it,

and here in the mountain we are protected to a certain degree."

Before the point could be settled a rattling among the neighboring stones was followed by the old, familiar cry of the West:

"Hands up and stand where you are. I'm back again and my name is Bullet Head!"

There was an unpleasant inflection to the words which pleased neither Allen nor Blenker, but as they recognized Bullet Head they made no motion toward their weapons.

In their opinion the way to manage the outlaw, if at all, was by outwardly seeming to trust him fully.

His manner, however, had grown even harsher than before.

"I'll trouble you to trot back into the cave," he said, sharply. "I'll be hanged if you go down to the village to tell your yarns about me."

"We will promise to say nothing about you," said Allen, hastily.

"Promises are breath, but when I hold a man I know where he is. Give up your weapons. Men, leave them nothing."

A heavier peal of thunder was followed by a blinding flash of lightning. The sublime pyrotechnics awed all for a moment, and the white light played on their features. Then the flash receded and the outlaws proceeded to obey their leader's orders.

A word from the ex-detective caused Allen to give up his weapons, but it was no sooner done than regretted. The odds against them were such that resistance was folly, and yet the young man was so impressed by a feeling that Bullet Head would do them harm that he was ready to risk all rather than surrender.

The Bravo ordered his men to make haste, and the arms of the prisoners were bound and they were ordered to follow.

No further time was lost. They went on through several gulches while the thunder rolled and the lightning played eccentrically along the mountain peaks.

A dash of rain came as the vanguard of the storm, but Bullet Head merely looked upward and shrugged his shoulders. His captives began to be uneasy; the idea had occurred to both that they were not on their way to the cave.

To what point, then, were they going?

The suspicion that he intended foul play recurred to their minds the stories told by the Red-Bartites. According to them, Bullet Head was not a chivalrous knight of the road but a brutal and cruel outlaw.

Before long the rain began to fall rapidly and add to the wildness of the scene, and the Missourians began to see what meant a storm among the mountains.

By the time Bullet Head paused all were completely drenched, but the captives forgot this fact as the Bravo stretched out his hand.

"Look there!" he tersely said.

They obeyed and saw a ravine with banks twenty feet high. It was a dreary-looking place, nor was its condition lessened by a skeleton tree which grew at one point in its bed. It had evidently long been lifeless and the bark, falling from the limbs, had left them almost as white as human bones.

"I'm going to give you a chance to see the shower; I'm going to hang you up on that tree where you can enjoy the mountain scenery," said the Bravo, with a chuckle. "Unluckily, there will be one drawback about it, and that is, when it has rained awhile a perfect torrent of water will come sweeping down there, churned to a foam by the rocks. It will wet your heels and, maybe, your scalps; and there is a possibility that your weight will serve to uproot the tree and end by drowning you or in sending you over Punch-bowl Falls. I tell you this in case you may want to prepare for possible misfortunes such as I have described. Men, take them away!"

The outlaws started to obey the order, but in Allen's opinion the time was passed for him to remain silent.

"Hold!" he cried, and the men instinctively obeyed; then, turning to Bullet Head, he added, "Are you in earnest about this matter?"

"I am," was the ready answer.

"Have you forgotten the promise you made?"

"No; but I have repented it. Fools! do you imagine that I will let you go to the village and tell your tales concerning me and then end by dragging me to—you know where? No, away with them, men!"

Allen was furious with rage, but his excited threat was wasted on the storm as he was borne away to the ravine. In fact, the men were as anxious as their leader to have the job over, for when the water once came down the ravine there was no safety there until it subsided.

Consequently, due haste was made in the final arrangements. On reaching the tree part of them ascended, while the others tied the rope about the prisoners' arms and shoulders.

A novel arrangement it was that Bullet Head had made, as was shown when it was finished.

Allen and Blenker hung suspended back to back, dangling from a strong limb over which the rope was passed, but it was not so very painful a condition, as yet. The rope had not

been noosed around their necks, but about their bodies, and they were in no real danger while the water kept out of the ravine.

The outlaws had promptly retreated, fearful of the flood, and the adventurers had the scene to themselves. The thunder, however, crashed as heavily as ever, the white lightning played around the mountain-tops and, darting quivering along the lower land, revealed the two men hanging from the ghostly tree—a very familiar sight in many a Western town, though it was seldom any human being had been thus situated in every particular.

"Well, we're in for it," said Blenker, somewhat dismally, when he saw they were alone.

"I should say so."

"I'm afraid that ain't the worst."

"What do you fear?"

"The remarks of that infernal Bullet Head were spiced with too much truth, I'm afraid. I've heard of just such gulches before. Such a rain as this accumulates a torrent of water, increasing in volume as it descends the mountain, until it is a howling torrent. If, as Bullet Head said, and there is little room to doubt it, it comes this way, we may expect to pass in our checks, as the saying goes, before long."

"Don't give up hope. This tree has probably withstood the storms of fifty years."

"The more reason why it should give way now," said Blenker, mournfully. "Besides, it is now top-heavy with over three hundred pounds of human flesh."

It was an argument Allen could not meet, and he searched the banks of the ravine in a vain attempt to see some favorable sign. He did see, however, that the eastern sky was not only becoming free from clouds but that there were signs of day along the horizon. That, at least, would take a degree of gloom from the situation.

"I'm afraid we're done for, this time," said Blenker, mournfully, after a pause.

"Curse that Bullet Head!" uttered Allen, between his teeth. "Once let me get out of this and I will shoot him on sight. Blenker, we have been fools! Quain, himself, killed Reginald Sinclair, and we were idiots to think he would make terms with us. He had the whole case in his own hands and he made the most of it."

The ex-detective did not attempt to say anything consoling; his professional pride was bitterly wounded by the termination of the affair. He had been well aware of the risk they were running in trusting the Bravo, but he had risked—and lost!

Now, he was repenting at leisure.

He was aroused from his meditation by a peculiar humming noise which had already attracted Allen's attention. New as they were to mountain life they were for a moment at fault, but Allen quickly solved the riddle.

"The torrent is coming!" he exclaimed.

The ex-detective glanced up the ravine. Nothing was yet in sight, but the noise had increased in volume and a shout from the shore announced that the outlaws were still there and awaiting what to them was to be rare sport.

"Hold hard!" shouted a voice unmistakably that of Bullet Head, "Here she comes!"

He spoke truly; the torrent was upon them!

CHAPTER XX.

OVER THE FALLS.

The gloom of night had receded before approaching day, and between the deepening light and the lightning's flash the imperiled men could see several rods away.

And as they looked up the ravine, this is what they saw:

Rushing around a curve in the gulch, like a wild horse at a mad gallop, came a mountain of water, huge, towering, irregular, and white as snow with foam except where it was darkened by the trees, bushes, and rocks it bore on its bosom; a sight once seen never to be forgotten, a sight full of peril to those in its path.

The mountain torrent is remorseless as death itself.

The men on the tree had little time for thought, and none for preparation, even had preparation been possible; but hanging back to back, with bound hands, they could move only their feet.

A moment's pause, and the terrible torrent of water struck the tree. The Bravo stood above them, sardonically looking on. The two men were lifted by the quick-rising flood until their position was a horizontal one. The dead tree bowed its ghostly top and dipped to the water, seeming about to yield to the great pressure.

There was a moment of uncertainty, and the scene had changed. The van of the flood was yards away, the water was shooting in an almost level mass between the banks it filled nearly to the top; but though less ominous of look than before, it ran so rapidly that the sticks on its bosom seemed shot from a gun at some point above.

The hanging men had resumed a perpendicular position, but it was because a mass of rubbish had lodged against the tree, which prevented them from being carried out on the breast of the flood.

The tree, too, had lifted its head after the

shock; but somehow, its bare, white arms seemed to make a mute complaint; while the water covered its trunk and left only those branches above the level.

The same remark will apply to Allen and Blenker; their bodies were below the water's top and only their heads were now visible to Bullet Head, and to his men who had gathered quickly on the bank. It was novel sport for them, and betting was brisk on the ability of the two to stand the pressure.

The wretched prisoners were less buoyant.

"I reckon I've got to drown," remarked Blenker, when they resumed their old position.

"I would be willing to if I could once get at that demon on shore," gritted Allen, with a furious glance toward Bullet Head.

"Twould be a consolation," the elder man acknowledged, "but we have our own folly to thank for this; we should not have dealt with the Bravo as with a man of honor. I am chiefly to blame for this, and I sincerely regret my folly. And I am old detective, too!"

"Say no more, old friend," replied Allen. "I do not blame you, and if we get out of this alive we will take pay as remorselessly as Bullet Head has dealt with us. He will never willingly explain what we want to know; but I swear to bring him to the gallows if a chance is given. That may bring him to a more pliable mood."

Conversation became irregular as they realized that their peril was increasing. Slowly but steadily the water was rising; measuring its increase with the exactness of their danger, they saw that it had arisen an inch. Three inches more and it would cover their mouths!

Allen ground his teeth and struggled furiously with his bonds. Those around his ankles he had already burst, but this did him no actual good, and the most determined efforts could not wrest his wrists asunder.

They seemed doomed to die there like brutes in a net.

On the shore Bullet Head and his friends were calmly watching, though they no longer made any comments. Perhaps they enjoyed the scene, or it may be the leader would not go until sure death had claimed its victims.

Suddenly, however, one of the men uttered a cry and pointed up the ravine. No need to ask what he meant. There, a second billow of water, broken loose from some impromptu dam, was sweeping down with great rapidity and rising three feet above the water level—high enough to bury the suspended men two feet under water.

The sight seemed to arouse even Bullet Head, who leaped to his feet and looked eagerly to see the result.

The water struck—the skeleton tree disappeared, men and all. A moment neither was visible, and then the tree arose and went shooting downward with Allen and Blenker hanging to the top.

It had been torn from its roots and was being swept toward the falls below.

As one man the outlaws wheeled and ran down the bank toward the place where the affair would soon be settled. Where the water went rushing over the jagged rocks it was churned to a white foam and no hope seemed visible for those who passed it.

On came the tree, with Allen and Blenker in tow, their forms dimly seen through the foam.

When the fall was reached some freak of chance elevated the tree-top for a moment in the air, and Bullet Head pointed derisively to the imperiled men.

Another moment and it disappeared in the foaming water and the outlaws saw their victims no more.

Were they really victims? Let us see. When they saw the second billow approaching, both men were filled with consternation, but before they had time for elaborate thought it was upon them, almost dashing out their consciousness, but the violence of the shock tore the tree loose and they arose to the surface.

One other thing had happened. Allen's hands were dashed against a sharp rock, and though his only injury was a bruise, the cord which held his wrists was cut as though by a knife.

Realizing the importance of this affair he made several rapid movements. From his pocket he drew his knife with all possible haste, and despite the foaming flood he succeeded in fully liberating both Blenker and himself.

Free from bonds they were still in the grasp of the water, and as their only hope lay in clinging to the tree they clung accordingly, though well aware that the fall was at hand.

Once, only, did Allen raise his voice; fearing that his more aged companion might despair, he placed his mouth at his ear and shouted:

"It is for our lives!"

Blenker nodded, quickly, and Allen saw that gray hairs had not lessened the power of his mind or his coolness. His eyes had never been steadier.

Another instant and the fall was before them. The tree-top arose and only the foam prevented Bullet Head from seeing that they were clinging not hanging, and then they shot over.

How they went through that whirlpool neither of them could ever describe, yet through

it they went, though not clinging to the tree. That was wrested away almost at the beginning and the men were tossed to and fro like corks.

A singular chance saved their lives; they struck an oblique current and, almost before they realized it, were shot off toward one side and safely deposited in a nook where the water was placid.

They looked at each other in mute surprise for a little while. It was the ex-detective who spoke first.

"Have you a ticket-of-leave?"

His coolness aroused his companion.

"We had better get out of this before Bullet Head appears or we may have a ticket to remain," he remarked.

And they did so; and in five minutes were at a spot where they believed they were safe to stop and rest.

The sun was rising and throwing golden light on the upper peaks, but the poetry of the situation was lost on the late voyagers. They were bruised, wet through, cold, hungry and without a weapon to their names.

While they rested they talked of the future. Clearly, it was no use to use persuasive means in dealing with Bullet Head; he had proved himself a mere brute and had broken his word, so it was to be war to the knife from that time.

Their only hope was to capture the Bravo and force a confession from his lips or bring him to the gallows.

It took considerable meditation to decide whether they should return to Bartlett's. The plight in which they must appear would have to be accounted for, and the mine-owner's suspicions might be aroused; but after some delay they decided to return and, keeping back the facts of the case, tell a story to suit themselves.

This was done, and if any one doubted the story they told they gave no signs. They were properly cared for, and when invested in dry clothing, purchased at Jason Perkins's store, they felt better than was to be expected.

A long conversation took place in their room, and Blenker urged a departure from the house. He had studied Bartlett and was convinced he was not the sort of a man to make any unguarded admissions, while it was not by any means sure he would heed the divine command, "Thou shalt not kill!" if he became suspicious.

Strong as was this argument, Allen favored remaining and they remained.

Their slight indisposition gave Miss Ware a chance to show her good will and she was unceasing in her efforts to make them comfortable, and as she and Allen were both on the same line of business there were some passages between them which were outwardly tender.

Wicked William seemed to think he had a call to make an observation on the late adventure.

"Colorado is a leetle onhealthy fur furriners," he observed to Allen, referring to his imaginary account of trouble with village roughs, "an' ef I might advance a suggestion, I would advise that ye engage me as a fightin' brigade. Thar won't no roughs fool 'round ye when I'm thar, no more'n a terrier will 'round a bull-dog."

"Should you injure them?"

"Ef nec'sary, I should, my friend; ef nec'sary, I should. But I don't think 'twould be nec'sary, fur ef I stamped my foot they'd go. I'm a terror when I scowl, an' them as knows me kin tell you I'm bad. I'm a rufyan an' a bruiser, an' I kin carve my dimensions in them as gits in my way!"

The speaker ran his fingers through his already tumbled hair and scowled illustratively.

"I don't doubt you," said Allen, "but I don't care to hire."

"Better think twic't. Ther market ain't glutted with cut-throats an' I'm liable ter be gone when you need me. Ketch on ter me an' I'm thar, an' you bev ther champion rufyan in this hyar State. You hear me?"

"I hear, but I am not anxious to invest, William. I value you too highly to make you a hired man, but we'll pull together when there is a thief in the silver-closet."

"I yield to your superior wisdom," said the champion cut-throat, meekly. "Mebbo you'll see me 'round when the next blizzard strikes, an' in case I'm thar you'll see that thar blizzard sell out fur ole clothes. Good-day!"

CHAPTER XXI.

BLENKER'S EXPERIMENT.

THE day was not at an end when the ex-detective came to Allen, who had just stepped out for fresh air after a somewhat tender interview with Hester Ware.

"I don't claim to be a mind-reader," said Blenker, quietly; "but faces and motions do amount to something."

Allen smiled.

"I suppose you refer to Miss Ware and myself?"

"Not in the least. My attention is now centered on Mr. Edmund Bartlett."

"Ha! What of him?"

"Unless I am a fool," said the ex-detective, "the old man has got his eyes open. He keeps up a smiling face, but his eyes look snaky."

"In plain words, you think he mistrusts us?"

"Yes."

"Well, what will you do about it?"

"First, telegraph to Denver for Detective Poore. In my opinion the hour has come to keep Bartlett constantly under our eyes; he must not, of course, be dropped on until Bullet Head is ours. Poore is my friend and will oblige me in this, and I'll take in both the men. We have made several false moves so far, and we mustn't do it again. Our game must be made sure of without delay."

"I'll bet a dollar you don't get a confession out of Bullet Head," said Allen.

"Taken! I'll say to Mr. Tom Quain, 'Take your choice between a clean breast of it in the Sinclair case with freedom as a reward, or a hanging occasion for the Harvey and Pike affairs.' Don't you suppose Tom'll weaken?"

"I hope so."

"He will. Now, walk over to the telegraph-office and I'll send a dispatch to Detective Poore after which I'll tell you about a trap I have planned for Bartlett."

They went, but when the office was reached they found the operator busy on an elaborate financial dispatch and had to wait their turns.

While thus employed Blenker picked up a scrap of paper from the floor and read carelessly, but at the end he looked at Allen in such a way that the latter held out his hand for the document.

This is what he read:

"There is a man here who looks like him. Can it be possible?"

This message, for it was written on a telegraph blank, was signed with Edmund Bartlett's name and addressed to Eben Garland, at the latter's office, St. Louis.

Allen turned quickly toward the operator, paper in hand, but the ex-detective stopped him. He knew there was need of caution, and he was just as sure that he had made an important discovery. Allen, however, was surprised to see him fold the paper and place it away in his pocket.

When the operator was at liberty the message was sent to Detective Poore, after which Blenker carelessly asked if a message had not been received there the fifteenth, from one Eben Garland, of St. Louis.

"Addressed to you?" inquired the operator.

"No," Blenker had to confess.

"To whom, then?"

"Edmund Bartlett."

"We are not allowed to divulge any matters of that kind," was the somewhat stiff reply.

Blenker was anxious, and he persisted until the man became angry and informed them that they had better go about their business.

"Take care that I don't return with the sheriff and compel you to oblige me!" cried the ex-detective.

"I wouldn't produce that or any other message without orders from my superior, if you brought fifty sheriffs."

That settled it, and the two went out together.

"Just as I expected," said Blenker. "There was a faint hope that an operator in this remote place might be wheedled, but you see the result."

"The result will be that he'll inform Bartlett just what has happened," muttered Allen.

"I doubt it. I'll give the man credit for being on the square, and I don't believe Bartlett, with all his money, can win favors from that operator. You will, at least, give me credit for one thing."

"What?"

"For the scrap of paper I have in my pocket. It is in Bartlett's writing and very compromising; we'll make use of it in a suit yet, see if we don't. Had I walked up to that telegrapher and shoved it under his nose, saying, 'What reply did you get to this?' he would not only have declined to tell but would have demanded the paper. Worse still, he would have enforced his demand or had us arrested for purloining private papers. That one escaped from where they are stored by mere chance. I foresaw all this and concealed the paper."

Allen recognized the truth of his statements and gave him due credit. They walked on discussing their affairs from the new point of view. It was no longer probable that Bartlett was suspicious; it was certain. They were not at fault to translate his telegram; he had seen that Allen resembled some one, and who should it be if not Robert Sinclair?

"My boy," said Blenker, quietly, "I expect to see you a millionaire in less than a year."

Allen did not answer; he was thinking of Rose Jackson. Her father had refused him her hand because of Thomas Quain's bad reputation; would be be equally severe in regard to that of Robert Sinclair if the new demand was backed by a million dollars?

With his knowledge of the world, Allen doubted it; the power of the grandest inventions of the world, such as the telegraph and steam engine, become bubbles compared with the power of gold.

While he was thus thinking the ex-detective was considering how to best avoid secret at

tacks from Bartlett. He decided that it would be well for only one of them to sleep at a time, and to eat only of such food as they first saw their host partake of.

He would have left the house only that he felt sure such a move would frighten Bartlett anew and, perhaps, frighten him away from the Bar.

As the reader is already aware, Blenker had learned what Bartlett knew and suspected the rest, with the exception of the fact that Eben Garland had telegraphed that he was on his way to Red Bullet Bar.

Bartlett was thoroughly uneasy, but he had resolved to await the arrival of Garland before proceeding to extremities. He felt sure that person could tell all he wished to know, and if his spy, Wicked William, did not succeed in learning anything he must await his arrival.

The lawyer had left matters in a bad state. His telegram had been vague, there seemed no hope of further news previous to his arrival, and as he was on the road Bartlett knew not where to address him.

Bartlett believed he was handling Wicked William to perfection and did not doubt his faithfulness. Really, Wicked William took good care not to give Bartlett any actual news, and, reporting fully to Crisp, he enabled the latter to form just such a message for the Bravo as he thought proper.

Thus, William was drawing wages from three employers and favoring the one who paid the most. The fellow had the faculty of looking out for number one, if nothing more.

The following morning the mine-owner received a letter by the mail. He opened it and read as follows:

"HUNUD SER:—These presents is two notify two you that thee fat is neer into thee fish. If you want two make yourself saf on thee Cinclare case, meat mee at red Groav this Eve att 9. I cann help you and hurtt others if you com. Kno me as wun who will help you in thiss sad afere. A FRIND."

Bartlett read and sat shivering like a leaf. Wretched as were the spelling and penmanship of the letter, the fact that it was a most ominous communication could not be concealed. He was face to face with what he had dreaded for a week past; the Sinclair affair, which he had believed settled a score of years before had arisen Phenix-like, and he had good reason to feel fear.

Why, he knew better than any one else.

Singular as it may seem, he decided that, even if Allen and his companion were what he suspected, they had no connection with the letter, and he resolved on his line of conduct in a short time.

He arose, went to his desk and took out a splendid silver-mounted revolver. It had been a gift from friends to whom he had been useful and bore the mark of manufacturers second to none in the United States; with that he was sure he would not fail.

He put fresh cartridges in the chambers and then laid it down, smiling in a secret way.

"I will meet him!" he said, half-aloud.

And so he intended, but he was resolved that the man should never go away alive. He had dallied long enough. His hand should send this unknown to destruction and then Allen and Blenker should go to the depths of the iron vault.

"Who hesitates, is lost," the schemer thought, as he went through the rest of his mail without seeing a word he looked at; "I will strike first and sweep them all out of existence. If they are inquired for, money will cover their trail; it will hide that of a troop of elephants!"

Certain eyes were watching Mr. Bartlett at supper that night, and when a chance occurred Blenker whispered to Allen:

"The fish bites; he will keep the appointment!"

The ex-detective had made no mistake, for shortly before nine o'clock Bartlett left the house and took his way toward Red Grove. We need scarcely say the silver-mounted revolver went with him.

Darkness had fallen before he started, and when he reached the Grove all was impenetrable inside, the moon being still an hour's march below the horizon.

If the mine-owner was nervous he gave no sign, but, when he saw he was ahead of the other man, he deliberately lighted a cigar and began pacing to and fro.

At the end of fifteen minutes he perceived a dark object approaching the grove. It came nearer and proved to be a man; it entered the trees and came straight toward the watcher, who was not surprised to see a coarsely-dressed, rough-looking fellow; it was to be expected from the style of the latter.

"This hyar is Mr. Ed Bartlett, I take it," observed the new-comer.

"Yes. What may I call you?" the mine-owner curtly asked.

"Call me Smith, though that ain't my handle. Let et pass, how'sever; I'm ther potater-bug that writ ther note 'bout matters an' things."

"Exactly. Well, what you do want?"

"I want ter be paid ter forgit what I know 'bout how Reginald Sinclair died!" was the business-like answer.

CHAPTER XXII. BARTLETT TRIES HIS SILVER-MOUNTED REVOLVER.

THE mine-owner, prepared for some such assertion, met the announcement without a start or change of face.

"What do you know?" he calmly asked.

"I know how he died," was the significant reply.

"How did he die?"

"Murdered by Tom Quain, at your command!"

It was a bold shot, on which the speaker placed all his dependence; but if it didn't go home, signs were deceptive—Bartlett could not avoid a start.

"What rubbish is this?" he hoarsely asked.

"It is ther rubbish that gave you a million dollars; it has enabled you ter roll fur twenty years in wealth which should never have been yours."

"My dear Munchausen—I mean Smith—you have a talent for fiction. You should not waste your time on the wild mountains of Colorado."

"Thar ain't a judge in St. Louis that would call et a lie. Let me tell w'ot I know, and that would be a Christmas goose ready for hangin' right away—yourself!"

Bartlett waved his hand impatiently.

"You have made an assertion," he said.

"Now, how are you going to prove it?"

"Bah!" was the reply; "you don't know that when Tom Quain went ter kill ther ole man I went with him; you don't know that I kin place my finger on Tom at any hour, a'most, an' prove all I say. Oh! I know all about that affair!"

"And you charge me with having instigated this crime?"

"I do, mister."

"Possibly you have a motive in calling me here to-night which you have not yet explained?"

"Possibly I *hev*," retorted Smith; "an' possibly I'll prove et afore I get through. I'll come right ter ther p'int. This is an important secret, an' it takes money ter keep sech things still."

"I see; you refer to black-mail. What am I to give you?"

The mine-owner spoke as coolly as though he was discussing a trivial affair.

"Would you prefer et in installments, or by ther lump?"

"By the lump, by all means. I dislike to owe a man anything—a foible of mine."

Mr. Smith glanced keenly toward his companion. It struck him that the signs of a surrender were not numerous, and he thought he detected a threatening inflection in the calm voice.

"Wal," he said, slowly, "ef you'll give me a thousand dollars, I'll hold my peace forever."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"The price seems small, and I like to pay enough to satisfy all claims. Five hundred or a thousand is a mere trifle. Given no more than that, you would be coming here again. That won't do. I'll be generous, and give you enough to ease my conscience, and so that you won't come back again. I'll give you—this!"

If Mr. Bartlett had not chosen quite so dramatic a way of doing his work he might have succeeded better, but he had to deal with a man just as shrewd as himself.

At the last word he jerked the already-cocked revolver from his pocket, and the flash and report followed almost in the same breath.

Bartlett's heart leaped for joy as his enemy fell flat, but his joy was short-lived. The man was not much sooner down than he was up, and before the amazed mine owner could raise the hammer again the silver-mounted revolver went flying into the bushes, and a less elaborate, but equally effective, weapon was pressed against his temple.

"Hold hard, my good man!" said Smith, with admirable coolness. "The surest recipe for getting your head blown off is to carry your ugliness further."

If the scene had been less exciting Bartlett might have seen that the uncouth style of speech had vanished, but this fact grew dim and weak as, in answer to his whistle, three dark bodies dropped lightly from the trees.

This wasn't the worst of it; one man alighted fairly on Smith's back, bearing him to the ground, and then four men stood over him.

They were Bartlett and his devoted Chinamen.

Once more the bushes parted and closed in a rapid way, and something decidedly hostile went into the happy family. Right and left fell the Celestials, and by the time Bartlett could comprehend what epidemic had stricken, he and the new-comer were the only persons standing.

The last arrival had given the Chinamen a lesson in the manly art of shoulder-hitting.

Where the finis would have found them if they had been left alone is uncertain, for the maw of the thicket seemed stuffed to its utmost. Out sprung another detachment, this time one of greater numbers, and a keen, sharp voice broke the silence:

"Hands up! The man who refuses dies, as sure as my name is Bullet Head!"

The band of the Bravo held the ground; there was no doubt of that, and from the mixed-up knot of Chinamen arose a variety of hands; they, at least, were going to obey and live to fight another day.

Bartlett saw a half-dozen revolvers bearing on him and fell into line, while Mr. Smith and the pugilistic gentleman found a place side by side and put up their hands with revolvers in them, the darkness hiding the last fact.

We need scarcely add that they were Blenker and Allen, or state that they did not hail the arrival of Bullet Head with joy. They could still show bruises received in the ravine.

"This seems to be all right," said Bullet Head, after a pause, "and I'm glad to see you have such sizable brains. I wouldn't think it from the way you have been fooling around here of late. Who interrupted the court at first? You did, I believe," he added, addressing Bartlett, "and I'll see that the thread is taken up right where you broke in. Men, get ropes and do your duty."

"I protest against this outrage!" cried Bartlett, in a voice far from calm.

"I expected you would, but it don't make a jot or tittle of difference. I hold the reins in this race."

The Bravo crossed the open space and went to the side of Allen.

"I didn't meet you at the cave this evening and dropped in to see about it. Of course I will see you through this affair; you had a taste of my style last night."

He turned away and Allen grated his teeth in silence. He was tempted to shoot the Bravo down in his tracks, but such a deed meant sure death for him. His cool allusion to the ravine affair was enough to stir up the most serene temper.

The outlaw surely held the field. The Chinamen could torture and murder secretly, or with the odds in their favor, but they were not aspirants for cold earth-beds.

Bartlett's hands had been tied behind him and a rope, noosed around his neck, flung over a limb. The outlaws knew and hated him, and they stood by the rope hungering for orders to pull.

"Old man," said the Bravo, "you interrupted John Smith here just as he was getting down to the pith of his business. He says you hired Reginald Sinclair killed. Now, then, blaze away and tell the truth!"

Allen and Blenker looked at each other in surprise. Did Bullet Head really desire a confession, or was this all a comedy for their diversion?

"What have you got to do about it?" Bartlett angrily asked.

"Very little, I confess. My part consists in hanging you until dead if you don't tell the whole truth. You hear me?"

"I hope, sir, that you are not foolish enough to take any stock in what that rascal said," expostulated Bartlett. "His words were wild and groundless, his object being to black-mail me. No dependence can be put on—"

"What you say," finished Bullet Head. "Don't malign Mr. Smith, he means well. As for you, I suspect there is truth in this rumor; I, too, have reason to believe you were concerned in the murder of Reginald Sinclair. If such be the fact, speak right out at once."

"It is false, utterly false—"

"I don't believe you," interrupted the Bravo.

"I swear it!"

"Heavy evidence, coming from you, but I am still a doubter. Bartlett, I want the truth in this case. Tell it!"

"I have: I swear it!"

"Hoist away!"

The order was most welcome to the road-agents, and in a moment more Bartlett was dangling from the limb. He was not kept in torture a great while, for the rope was loosened at a word from the Bravo.

"That was a test of truth," the latter serenely observed. "Is your vision clearer now, Bartlett?"

The latter had coughed violently, but, recovering his usual state to a certain degree, he leveled a furious glance at the Chinamen who had done his villainy for some years past.

"Help, here, help! or I'll kill you all!" he fumed.

"Your temper is wretched!" commented Bullet Head. "Give him the second degree!"

Again the mine-owner was pulled clear of the ground, and this time he was given a chance to see what hanging was like. It took some work to put him in condition again, but even then the desired confession was lacking. He swore to his innocence by a most solemn oath, nor could all of Bravo's threats shake him.

In the midst of this scene, of which Allen and Blenker were interested observers, one of the road-agents touched the former on the arm.

"Now is your time to get out of this," he said. "Nobody will harm you now, but if you wait until the show is over you may feel the rope. Go quickly but silently!"

He seemed in earnest, and as they were con-

vinced that Bartlett would not speak, they did not neglect the chance.

When the mine-owner was lowered after a third hanging he was so weak that he fell to the ground unconscious, and Bullet Head struck his hand angrily on his hip.

"Useless!" he said, "utterly useless. We'll leave him here in charge of his Chinamen and—Where are the other prisoners?"

It was time the question was asked, for they were not visible.

"Darke," said the Bravo, angrily addressing one of his men, "this is your fault."

"I'm afraid you're right," was the humble reply, "and I'm sorry enough for it. Give me half a dozen men and I'll recapture them."

"Too late," answered the chief. "We'll leave the heathen here to nurse their master back to life while we make tracks for the mountain. Fall into place—trot!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"COLD POISON!"

WHEN Bartlett recovered consciousness the road-agents were gone and he and his Chinamen had the grove to themselves. He awoke with a most uncomfortable feeling both physically and mentally. Hang a man until he swoons and he is likely to retain ill feelings for some time.

"Where are they?" gasped the mine-owner.

"Gone, all gonee," answered Ki Lee.

"Where?"

"Dunno; me not care welly muchee to foller; dey debbils, me t'inks dey tek me warm placee me foller."

The logic was unanswerable, but Bartlett, sitting up, felt amid the whirl of his brain that he would give half his wealth to have them in his power. No need then to wonder if any one laid the blame of Reginald Sinclair's death at his door; he had received proof enough to convince any human being.

He tried to think clearly. One of his enemies had been Bullet Head. He had before had proof that the Bravo was no friend, at the time Lila was kidnapped, and now it was no use to speculate on his standing. An enemy he surely was, and Bartlett had almost thought his voice was familiar.

But what of the man who had called himself Smith? He, the mine-owner felt sure, had come in disguise, and he had as carefully disguised his voice, but the former strongly suspected his identity.

When the pugilistic man was knocking the Chinamen down like ten-pins, Bartlett believed he had recognized him despite the darkness. Like an echo to his thoughts came a question from Ki Lee:

"Why 'Melican man knockee me downee so muchee?" he inquired in an aggrieved voice.

"Who knocked you down?" was the eager inquiry.

"Plitty dark an' not klite sure, but me flink it was de man you calle Alley, all samee."

"Alley! It was his nearest approach to 'Allen,' and his master found his suspicions confirmed.

"I see it!" he thought, excitedly; "these men are just what I expected. They are here to ruin me and learn the true story of the death of Reginald Sinclair. That Smith was Birch, and Allen was hiding near at hand."

This synopsis of the case showed Bartlett on what precarious ground he stood, and by a mental vision he saw himself deprived of his wealth and led to the gallows. The perspiration started freely to the brow of the millionaire, for there are cases where Mammon has to turn pale.

Like a flash came the resolution to dally no longer, to strike a decisive blow at whatever risk and rid himself of these enemies who threatened to ruin him.

He remembered the iron vault and resolved to consign them to it. The cover had not been raised since the day when the second of his victims had been hurled down, but it might safely be done now; life must have long since departed from their bodies. In such company Allen and his companion would be welcome.

One thing, alone, seemed to stand in the way of accomplishing this work; it would be hard to put two able bodied men into the hole by force.

"Ki Lee," he said, abruptly, "you were once a doctor in China, wasn't you?"

"Me docto some; study mlecdine some timee, but folks no get sickie, or else go to lother docto," Ki Lee replied, a tinge of sadness in his voice.

"But you poisoned my dog?"

"Me unnerstan' ploisin all kinds. Ploison docto glet more payee than udder docto in China."

"Good! Well, Ki Lee, pay attention to me. If they are astir when we get home you must furnish a poison for their drink; if they are in bed, as seems probable, what can you do?"

"Shut window an' ploisin air," was the ready reply.

"And you can do this?"

"Plenty easy."

It was enough, and Bartlett got his Celestial cut-throats in motion and all returned to the house. As he had expected, he found Allen

and Blenker in their rooms. They were awake, sitting up and smoking, but when he went boldly to the room they remained as cool as though nothing had occurred out of the usual channel.

Plainly, they had entered by the window, escaping the notice of Wicked William, who had been lounging about the house.

Bartlett's resolution to offer them poison in drink vanished before their imperturbable manner; he gave them credit for being sharp enough to suspect his artifice.

As a result, he kept up a show of friendliness when in their presence, and seized the first chance to speak with Ki Lee alone. Explaining the situation, he asked how the poisoning was to be done.

"Dey leab window open," said Ki Lee, "an' we squirtee plepared water into room, an' den closee her up tightee. Dey breathe air an die-ee!"

"And you can prepare this poisoned water?"

"Yes."

"Do it, then."

Ki Lee went away and Bartlett began pacing the room nervously. Once he could handle such matters with an iron hand, but time had made its imprint on him, and he very much preferred not to indulge in any villainy—*where the opposition was likely to be strong*.

Yet these two men, and especially the one who looked like another man he had once known, must die to hide the traces of another crime.

He was still pacing the room when Lila entered. She looked at him searchingly; but it was no time for a minute analysis; she bore a letter in her hand, which at once drew his attention.

"It arrived by the last mail," she explained, seeing his glance; and then, as he took it, she sat down by the window.

The post-mark—St. Louis—interested him, but the handwriting gave him a thrill of joy he had not experienced for some time. One glance was enough to tell him that Eben Garland had written just before leaving St. Louis, and he believed the explanation of the riddle was at hand.

He was not mistaken; Garland had written as follows:

"Your telegram served to open my eyes, and as I had just been wondering at the disappearance of a certain party I put the two circumstances together, and fear there is cause for alarm. We have been deceived by my worthless brother-in-law, Thomas Quain. His infant son died twenty years ago, Sept. 14th, and he replaced it by another child—*whose, he alone knew*. I have just forced this confession from my sister, Mrs. Quain. She also admits telling as much to Allen, the substituted child, now a young man, who has suddenly left St. Louis. It looks as though he suspected something. If there is any one in Red Bullet Bar who looks as you say, *put him out of the way!* I leave for your town at once; am due at Beaver City the 16th, from which place I go by stage to the Bar."

This letter could no longer surprise the mine-owner, but he accepted it as proof of all he suspected. He crushed the letter in his hand, savagely resolving that the men who had had the audacity to venture under his roof should die there.

"Father!"

The schemer started at the word, and looked with a wavering gaze at Lila, who had watched him steadily while he read.

"Well?" he said, curtly.

"Are you ready to look over your books tonight?"

Lila verified the entries of Mr. Tubbs, the hired book-keeper, once a month, with her father by her side, and they never retired on such occasions until past midnight.

"No," he replied, impatiently. "I don't feel like it, now. You had better retire."

"I am not sleepy, but I would like to examine the books."

"I tell you I don't want to touch them," he said, irritated alike by her pertinacity and her steadfast gaze.

"Remember," she said, in a voice deeper than usual, "that there's nothing like work to keep one out of mischief."

The mine-owner started.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, sharply.

"Why, that's an old saying. Don't you think it's true?"

Edmund Bartlett did not answer, but with a fixed stare he returned his daughter's gaze. How much did she suspect? Something, he felt sure, for he saw in the labor proposition an artifice to keep him busy when he would have devoted his time to the contemplated crime, while her more pointed remark could not be misunderstood.

"I have no time for such childish conundrums," he said, at last, harshly. "More than this, I wish to be alone. Will you retire to your room?"

It was a question, but a threat of menace ran through it. Lila arose without a word, went to his side and put her hands on his shoulders.

"You had better retire, too, father," she said, and he could see that her lips quivered.

"Why?"

"I think it would be safer."

"Safer? Bah! you are getting dramatic, girl. Why would it be safer?"

"I don't think I need to explain, nor will I urge you further, but I hope you will not do anything which may some time cause you trouble!"

At the last word she glided from the room without another look, moving toward her own chamber.

Edmund Bartlett took one step forward as though he would stop her and then paused. His hands were clinched and his face seemed to have lost color.

"She knows all!" he said, in a whisper.

"What accursed chance has given her this information? Malediction! if I carry out my plan she will betray me! Will she? No, by my life, no; I'll see Crisp at once and direct him to abduct her. If he demurs I'll give him a thousand dollars—anything, so long as he keeps her out of sight for a month. A month? Why not forever?"

The last idea was one which troubled even him. His career had been one of crime, but to have the murder of a woman on his hands would be new infamy.

"Crisp shall do as he will," he added, "but she must be kept from sight!"

He strode from the room, left the house and hastened toward the cabin where lived Lila's rejected lover. Luckily, at that moment he was playing Crisp, not Darke, the road-agent, and Bartlett lost no time in coming to business.

It was not strange that Darke should hesitate for a moment, for he knew the projected movement would oblige him to separate from the band, but when his would-be father-in-law placed a thousand dollars in his hand he decided to take the risk—the risk, because desertion and treachery were punished with death when possible by the outlaws.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOW THE SCHEME RESULTED.

ALLEN and Blenker were smoking in their room, and a casual observer would have said they were strangely at their ease. Really, they were seated so that every point of the room was under their observation, and they were on the alert for danger.

After leaving the grove they had held a short consultation, and then returned to the house. They did this because they believed their identity unknown to Bartlett, as regards the affair at the grove, and they wished to remain in the mine-owner's house, if possible.

Yet they were watching keenly for trouble.

Some time had elapsed when there was a soft knock at the door. Allen said "Come in!" and very much to their surprise, Lila entered. Her face was paler than usual, but the firm look around her mouth told of a brave spirit brought to a fixed resolution.

"Gentlemen," she said, at once, "I have but a minute to spend here, and I will lose no time. I have come to tell you that you must leave this house!"

Her words were plain; but her manner was not so easily interpreted.

"Leave?" repeated Allen. "Why so?"

"Because your safety demands it. I cannot, and will not, explain more, but advise you to heed what I have said, and leave the house at once, never to return."

She turned toward the door as she spoke, but Allen hastily arose.

"I beg your pardon," he said, hastily; "but I am so convinced that you are our friend, that I am anxious to know more. Pray, what danger menaces us?"

A sad smile crossed the girl's face.

"Do not ask me that; do not ask anything. It is impossible for me to explain, and wholly useless for you to ask. Forget, from this hour, that I have spoken to you; but heed my warning. Leave this house immediately if you value your lives!"

Once more she turned away, and her manner was such that they did not try to stop her. She departed, and left the men looking at each other. There was some room for speculation, but little for mistake. Beyond much doubt her father knew of their share in the grove affair, and intended to do them bodily harm.

"Shall we go?" the ex-detective calmly asked.

"Not like a coward at night!" was the hot reply. "If Mr. Bartlett wishes to order us out, let him come and say so; if he attempts to murder us, we'll show him that two can play at that game."

"Puffectly fit an' proper!"

The words were spoken in a new voice, and looking hastily toward the door they saw Wicked William. During their excitement they had neglected their watching, and he had noiselessly entered through the door.

"Puffectly fit an' proper!" he repeated, as they remained looking at him in consternation.

"What are you doing here?" Allen sharply demanded.

"Driving a gold spike inter ther Central Pacific; don't ye hear me hammer?" was the serene answer.

"I mean, by what right do you invade our room?"

"Didn't come in by right; am sca'cely ever

actuated by any such emotion. Might an' wrong is my motter, fur I'm a ruffyan an' a cut-throat. I'm ther Colorado Terror an' various other things too numerous ter mention."

Wicked William ran his fingers through his tangled beard and scowled until his small eyes almost disappeared behind a collection of wrinkles, but at the last word his listless manner vanished.

Producing a letter from among his rags he tossed it on the table.

"Found that thar on ther floor," he said, "an' ez I was inclined ter think it might amooze you, hyar it be. Read it, if you wanter; I don't keer a durn. I'm a cut-throat, an' them don't keer fur nutbin'."

William opened the door abruptly at the last word and passing through, closed it in the same fashion. Thus, an interesting scene was hid from those within the room, and they did not suspect that the ragged man's quick ear, having detected something outside, had enabled him to detect a spy.

He stood looking down on Foolish Joe, the cripple.

"Hello, Hop-o'-my-Thumb!" he said in an even tone. "Didn't expect ter see you 'round this evening; I sw'ar I didn't. I observe that you are strength'nin' your mind by eavesdroopin' at folkses' doors."

The putative idiot sat looking at him vacantly, his ugly face expressive of nothing except ugliness.

"Puffectly fit an' proper!"

Wicked William repeated the words absently while he stroked his shaggy beard in the same fashion.

"Thar is suthin' about your int'restin' face that impresses me right strong," he continued. "One can't see ye without hankerin' fur your friendship, an' when one sees ther ferocity with which you, shattered both in yer brains an' legs, kin eavesdroop, he feels like wonderin' what deeds o' darin' an' other things you might do ef ye had ther nat'rals lights o' man. Perhaps you would like ter introooce a few resoloots hyar?"

Wicked William meant to be fair, but the cripple only muttered unmeaningly and caressed his lower limbs.

"Them legs remind me o' ther hose-pike we used on Engine 10, when I run with ther boysses in ther sixties. They wobble around wuss than a baby's. Ef they was mine I'd make them useful—use them fur a necktie, suspenders, or even garters, ez 'casion demanded."

"Gur, gur, gur!" muttered Foolish Joe.

"Puffectly fit an' proper! I am at yer service, but we can't talk hyar. S'pose we take a walk. I kin see somethin' loomin' up in ther nigh future, an' ef we git under ther bed while ther storm rages ther lightnin' won't strike us. Amble arter me, Joseph!"

Wicked William pulled gently on the cripple's arm, and at the signal the latter moved along the hall, using his legs as machinery of no use but bound to go with him. His face was expressionless, but the self-styled cut-throat looked thoughtful and continued to stroke his beard.

He got the cripple out of the way none too soon, for Bartlett entered a moment later, having just returned from Crisp's cabin.

He went at once to Ki Lee's room and found the latter serenely smoking.

"Well, have you prepared your stuff?" he quickly asked.

"Ready, all samee. Jess let 'Melican men go 'sleepin' an' Ki Lee send dem ober de lange."

He then showed his infernal preparation to Bartlett, who admired the ease with which the liquid could be squirted several feet away. It was harmless as yet, for one drug, and that the potent one, remained to be added.

Three hours passed. The household seemed to have retired without exception. All was dark and silent. The clock struck one.

Then the front door opened and three men stole silently out, turned the corner and moved toward the windows of the St. Louis men's room.

We need scarcely say they were Bartlett, Ki Lee and one of the other Chinamen, or that they were on their way to carry out the infamous scheme to end the lives of the two guests.

A ladder had been placed near at hand, and this was lifted and carried along. When the proper place was reached they leaned it against the wall directly under the window.

The moon was shining tolerably clear, and while the fringe of trees threw the night prowlers into shadow, enough light penetrated to the chamber to show Ki Lee, who first ascended the ladder, the forms of two men who were sleeping on the bed.

At least, such was the report he made to Bartlett.

Fate seemed to smile on the schemers, and once more Ki Lee went up the ladder. This time he bore the tools with which he proposed to deluge the room with an air-poisoning and man-killing liquid.

It was easily done. Silently worked the machine, surely sped the liquid, and Ki Lee knew that when the room was closed whoever breathed the air for half an hour would never breathe again.

This done he lowered the window and came down the ladder.

"Me fixee dem," he said. "Go up bime-byee; no stirree, but be stone deadee!"

"Wait in silence," said Bartlett. "Do not speak again."

His direction was obeyed and a half-hour passed slowly. Bartlett was far from being calm inwardly. He had reason for looking on the deed as a momentous one. He thought of the dying pair above and shivered. His heart beat with a real, or fancied, loudness which frightened him.

He was glad when Ki Lee spoke.

"Tlime enough now," he coolly said.

"Are you sure they are dead?"

"Me wallant them."

"Then I will go up."

He ascended the ladder and peered into the room. The dark forms were still visible; undoubtedly they had died in their sleep. He was filled with exultation and raised the window. Feul, drug-laden air rushed out, but he bent low and waited until it became purified.

This done he prepared for further steps. It had been arranged that while the Chinamen remained below he should go in alone, and he crept through the window.

Once inside his courage began to waver. On the bed lay two men who had died by his decree; their blood was on his hands. He shivered, hesitated, and then hastily approached the bed.

Dreading the result he reached down and pulled back the bed-clothing to see the faces which were invisible in the dim light—pulled them back and then uttered a faint cry.

The forms were headless!

For a moment he was confused and at fault, and then, flinging the clothes further back, he knew the truth.

He had been tricked; the forms were mere shams, effigies, and his enemies were not there.

He stood dumfounded, staring at the bed even after the passage of a cloud over the moon threw the room into shadow; and though footsteps had announced the entrance of his Chinamen, as he believed, he did not turn until the return of light aroused him.

That pause had been one full of alarm; the absence of the men and the effigies they had left were conclusive proof that his intended crime had been suspected, if not known.

They must be sought for, captured and slain or all was lost. He wheeled with the order on his lips, but after one glance staggered back against the bed, the words dying away in his throat.

There, still and stern, and looking pale in the moonlight, stood Allen and the ex-detective.

CHAPTER XXV.

LIEUTENANT DARKE WALKS IN.

BARTLETT was thoroughly frightened. His first idea was that he was looking on a pair of ghosts, but as he remembered that these two men still existed in the flesh, he gave up the idea and decided that he had been doubly outwitted.

At this stage of affairs Blenker thrust a revolver against his left breast and steadily exclaimed:

"Surrender, sir! Not a word of alarm, or a move toward resistance, or you are a dead man. You are my prisoner!"

"What do you mean?" Bartlett gasped.

"That we are not to be murdered to-night. We hold the best cards in this game and we are going to use them. Allen, tie his hands!"

"I will not submit!" cried the guilty man. I will—"

"What?" demanded the ex-detective, in an icy voice.

Evidently, Mr. Bartlett had no plan formed, for he sunk back on the bed and like one in a dream allowed Allen to apply the bonds.

"There," added Blenker, "you are nice and safe now, and in a condition where your propensity for evil-doing can't have full sway."

The mine-owner's weakness was passing, and now that it was too late he regretted that he had yielded so tamely, though it was a consolation to know he was still in his own house and surrounded by men who had been attached to him by gold.

"What are you going to do with me?" he suddenly asked.

"Take you to St. Louis, and put you on trial for the murder of Reginald Sinclair!"

"So it was you I met in the grove!" he cried, scornfully. "I suspected as much. Fools! why waste your time on such idle dreams?"

"Simply because we want to settle up the Sinclair affair, and give you your deserts."

"Puffectly fit an' proper."

It was Wicked William who interpolated this remark, as he swaggered into the room, and Allen took his hand.

"Friend," he said, "I am not eloquent enough to tell you how much I thank you. You have done nobly."

"I'm sorry, but 'twas an accident. For a champion cut-throat, I've got a long ways out o' my canawl. Ef ther red slayer was slayin' ter-day, yer wouldn't speak ter him with impunity."

The speaker wound up with a ferocious scowl;

but Allen only smiled. He had begun to understand the man, and knew that an honest nature lurked under his rage.

He had aided them to set this trap for Bartlett, and but for him they might not have been able to subdue the two Chinamen outside without noise.

When Bartlett saw that Wicked William was also against him he felt a fresh wave of despair, though he did not forget one event which had been set down for the night, and in which he placed considerable hope.

Allen and Blenker consulted, and decided to remain in the house till morning. They might call the Red Bar sheriff and make charges against Bartlett at once, but they had some hope that the Denver detective, to whom they had telegraphed, would arrive in the morning; and there was a doubt whether the Bar sheriff would arrest the millionaire at their command.

Thus Bartlett, Ki Lee and the other two Chinamen were confined in one room, bound, and with the captors near their side.

Wicked William had previously turned the key on Foolish Joe, but when he went to look for him, the fellow was gone.

An open window indicated his course.

"Ther durnation imp has abbreviated his stay," said the ragged man, "an' I know now what I s'pected afore. Ef he had lacked ther use o' his legs, he'd never gone out thar so slick. It sticks in my noddle that Joseph is a fraud—durned ef it don't!"

"He will bring help for Bartlett, then," said Allen.

"Possibly he will; but ef they come, ther red slayer will arise in his wrath."

"We will hold this house, if possible," Allen declared.

"Puffectly fit an' proper," William commented.

No attention had been given to Lila. She remained in her room, and they believed her unconscious of what had occurred; they hoped she would sleep on until morning.

It was, therefore, a disagreeable surprise to Allen when, in making one of his periodical rounds of the house, he met her face to face.

He was embarrassed; but she gave him no time to form a line of conduct.

"I wish to speak with you, Mr. Allen," she said, steadily. "You can guess the subject."

"You refer to your father, of course."

"Yes; and I have come to ask you to liberate him."

"It is a request which gives me pain, for it is certainly a most unpleasant task to be obliged to refuse a daughter's pleas. Yet, Miss Bartlett, we have not seized your father through any mere personal hostility. As much as I regret to say it, he is wanted by the law!"

"Do not understand me as disputing the justice of what you have done. It is not that. If—if I was sure of his innocence, his captivity would seem but a trifling affair, soon to end."

Their eyes met and they understood somewhat of what was passing in each other's minds, but Allen failed to answer.

"What I ask is that you will give him a chance to live a different life, if, indeed, he has led one of error in the past. It is a dreadful thing to die, Mr. Allen, and far worse when one is unprepared. I ask mercy for my father, the only relative I have in the world. I am motherless, and the shadow of double orphanage falls on my path. For my sake, spare that old man's life!"

She dropped upon her knees and extended her clasped hands toward him.

He felt a pang of bitter regret. Had he followed the impulses of his heart he would have sworn to do her bidding, but he remembered that for twenty years the world had called his father—if, indeed, Robert Sinclair was such—a murderer and he turned from the temptation.

"I can't!" he muttered.

"What has he done?"

"Don't ask me; you had better not know."

"I am his daughter."

"So much the more reason why you shouldn't know. If you knew all—"

"Go on!"

"Your love would turn to horror."

"Then, that is just the reason why I should plead for him. Oh, sir! you are good and generous; will you see a woman kneel in vain at your feet? Mercy, mercy! Spare my father! You waver; I see you do; oh! do not let the impulse pass by. I implore you, by the memory of your mother, listen to me. Say that you will let him go free! We will go away, hundreds of miles, and all our money shall be yours."

She had caught his hand and her plea was made rapidly and vehemently. He was deeply moved and troubled. Believing her to be honorable herself, he was resolved that the future should bring her no want; that he would care for her; but how could he say, "I must hang your father, but I'll care for you?"

"Useless!" he exclaimed, at last; "you ask in vain. Heaven knows I would avoid this necessity if I could, but even you cannot undo the past nor change the future."

His voice was firm and she burst into tears, a weapon more potent than any other. He would

rather have met reproaches, threats or persuasion. Yet, he faced the storm with manly firmness, as well as manly regret, and the fate of Edmund Bartlett was sealed so far as he could control it.

Convinced that this was so, Lila at length went to her room again. She showed no anger or resentment against Allen, and he pitied her more than ever.

Another hour passed peacefully, and the fears they had felt when the escape of Foolish Joe was discovered began to abate. One danger must be grappled with early in the morning; Hester Ware would return from her visit to the neighbors, and she was not one to be subdued except by force.

It was destined, however, that matters should take another turn before morning. The prisoners all seemed to be asleep, Blenker was nodding, and Allen was hearing, without comprehending, some discourse from Wicked William, when, without warning, a compact body of men surged through the door and a dozen revolvers glistened in the light, the muzzles bearing on our friends.

"Hands up!" cried a sharp voice. "Try to raise a weapon and off go your heads!"

It was a command seldom disobeyed when the revolver party holds the drop, but the trio by the table did not cower in the slightest degree.

Every man made a grasp for his revolver, and then there was a roar as the intruders fired in concert and bullets whistled, with live targets at three yards' distance.

A crash followed as Wicked William, pitching forward as a dead weight, splintered the table and brought it to the floor; while the light, flying off at right angles, went out in a provoking fashion and left the room in total darkness.

Allen and Blenker were not the men to yield tamely, and when they found they had escaped the first volley their own revolvers began to work. True, they could not see their targets, but they were so much huddled together that a heavy fall at once announced the success of their attack.

Then there was a rush and they would have been swept out of existence had not the fragments of the table intervened. Down went the first man, and several others came tumbling on top of him in hopeless confusion.

Blenker caught Allen's arm.

"This way; let's save our prisoner!" he said.

They made a move for Bartlett, but when they reached him some one else was in the way. Allen, however, was thoroughly aroused, and by one sharp blow he rolled him over on the floor, his fall being drowned by the swearing of those already prostrate.

A moment more and the two friends had their man by the arms, and it was no very long task to drag him out of the room.

In the mean while, pandemonium seemed let loose in the other room, and revolver-shots and angry yells were mingled in a tremendous din. Allen and Blenker would have retreated further, but they were in a place from which there was but one exit, and they stood still, expecting at every moment to see the enemy invade their new quarters.

In the midst of the uncertainty, there was a tremendous crash which clearly announced the fall of the front door.

"That's the men of Red Bullet Bar," said Blenker, "and now all depends on where they place their support!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SENTENCE OF DEATH.

DURING all this uproar, Bartlett had remained cool and submissive. He had recognized Crisp, alias Lieutenant Darke, when the intruders first appeared, and he had no doubt but what it would end by Lila being carried off, as arranged with Crisp, and in the death of Allen and Blenker, which must occur now anyhow.

The coming of the Red-Barites, if such they were, changed the course of events considerably.

For ten minutes there was a good deal of noise, though no more shooting, and then men appeared at the door with lights and revolvers plentifully displayed.

Each one of the trio recognized Sheriff Wood at their head, and it was clear the law-abiding citizens of the town were at the front.

Both Bartlett and Blenker spoke at once; the former to call for help and the ex-detective to ask the official to take Bartlett as his prisoner; but as might be expected the rich citizen triumphed over the almost unknown non-residents from the very start.

"Cover those fellows!" cried Wood, "and if they try to escape shoot them down!"

"That isn't our purpose, at all," said Blenker, sturdily. "I charge this man with murder and ask you to arrest and hold him until I can obtain orders to send him to St. Louis."

Having no doubt of his ability to sway all Red Bullet Bar, Bartlett laughed mockingly.

"A very pretty tale, but it won't work," he

sneered. "My dear Wood, I am not comfortable enough to stay here long, especially as these cut-throats may take a fancy to kill me."

This remark aroused the sheriff.

"Hands up, you two!" he said, fiercely. "Will you surrender or die where you are?"

"We surrender, of course," said Blenker, in an even voice. "I have committed no crime and do not fear captivity, but I give you warning that you are committing a mistake."

"Mistake be hanged! Perhaps you can make me believe black is white."

"Nothing of the kind, sir; I leave it to the future to show you that you now believe black is white."

The sheriff advanced and they gave up their weapons without a word. Bartlett was liberated and a guard appointed for Allen and Blenker.

"You came just in time," said the wily mine-owner, shaking Wood's hand. "These wretches were threatening me with death unless I gave up my money. But I had forgotten that I heard some female cry for help; I fear they have frightened my daughter, Lila. Please come with me. Luckily, or unluckily, Miss Ware is not at home."

The sheriff zealously followed, and when Lila's room was reached it was found in disorder and the girl was nowhere to be seen. Bartlett was delighted, for he saw that Crisp had done his work well, but he feigned the most violent grief, running about the house in a pretended search for her and seeming almost unmanned.

When it was certain that she was gone the whole crowd gathered around Allen and Blenker and fierce cries arose on every side. Bartlett had cunningly given out the idea that the two were the leaders of the abductors and the men were mad for revenge for what they honestly believed to be a base outrage.

"Hang them!"

"Get a rope!"

"Kill the wretches!"

These cries were anything but pleasant, but the ex detective, who had seen many wild scenes before, smiled in their faces.

"I shall wait just a week for you to say those words over, that time with Ed Bartlett for the prisoner," he calmly remarked.

It was a rash remark, but it was drowned in the cries of the would-be lynchers. Allen, who was really alarmed but outwardly calm, saw that the sheriff wavered and felt inclined to yield, but, luckily, as strong as were his prejudices, he had enough honor to remember the demands of law.

With hostile hands outstretched to seize the prisoners for Judge Lynch, he pushed them aside.

"No, no, boys!" he said, firmly, "you can't do it in that way in Red Bullet Bar. Give them over for trial, and I'll bet a plug of tobacco with any one of you that they swing before another sundown!"

He found no takers, so excited were the men, but they yielded to his command and fell back. Lynchers they would not be that night, but one burly fellow tapped Allen on the shoulder and said:

"You don't get out o' this hyar town alive!"

Allen did not think prudent to reply.

Crisp had escaped successfully with his prisoner, and even Bartlett did not know where he had gone. The millionaire had good reasons for never wanting to hear from Lila again.

Wicked William was not to be found about the place and his fate was in doubt. It was clear that his wound had not been mortal, and as there seemed no reason why Crisp should want him, there was a hope that he had escaped.

Ki Lee and the other China-men had been liberated before the arrival of the rescuers, so they were able to come to the scratch and swear to what their master had said.

Allen and Blenker were taken to jail, and when the house was cleared Bartlett found Hester Ware there to help him. She had promptly returned on hearing of the trouble.

"Well," she brusquely said, when they were alone, "you have played quite a little game, haven't you?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, feigning ignorance.

"Simply that if the men of the Bar would get the dust out of their eyes it wouldn't be healthy for you. My dear uncle, I am now your sole relative and, I think, your sole heir; it will pay you to use me well."

"Haven't I done so?" he hastily asked.

"Always, but henceforth you must do better. This is a house of secrets and you want my help to keep them from leaking out, you know."

Bartlett looked into his niece's wicked eyes and decided that it would not be well to quarrel with her. She was not one to be cowed by words; his best course was to go light and, if she became obnoxious, remove her in his silent way.

"My dear," he said, calmly, "the mishap to Lila places you at the head of my indoor affairs for the time being, and I shall not allow one occupying that position to want for the things due her station."

Vague as was his answer she seemed to be satisfied, while, on his own part, he knew he had secured an ally who would be faithful while he made it to her interests.

At the same time Wicked William was seated on a rock at a point where he could overlook the town. He was looking straight down toward the jail and his face wore a thoughtful expression.

"They're thar," he observed, for the twentieth time. "Yas, they're thar, but they won't stay long. Bartlett is afeered on 'em, an' ez be is high lord priest in this suction he'll let loose thar epidemics and contagions onto them. Ther red slayer will slay, onless—unless ther champion cut-throat does suthin' fur 'em! . But, what kin he do?"

That was the question which agitated Wicked William's mind, and he was long in coming to a decision.

"Don't see ary other way" he finally observed. "I must amble up ther mount'n side an' tackle Bullet Head in ther name o' ham—an' other things. He can't low a first villain like them two ter perish at ther side. It's pfectly fit an' proper fur him ter chip . an' he must do it. I'll go an' see ther durnation critter!"

In the mean while, preparations were being made for the prisoners' trial, if such a farce can be dignified with so honorable a name. From the hour that Bartlett made his charges, they were doomed so far as Red Bullet Bar could control the future. Was the richest man for miles around to be thwarted when he wanted to hang a couple of men?

Not if the Bar knew its own mind!

Yet, there was a ceremony they called a trial. Allen and Blenker were brought from the jail and brought to the bar of so-called justice. Bartlett accused them of breaking into his house, robbing him, committing an assault and abducting his daughter.

The last crime, as he well knew, was enough to secure a hempen cravat in Red Bar, and the others were not to be laughed at. The schemer also expressed the opinion that the prisoners belonged to Bullet Head's gang, and the crowd became so angry that Sheriff Wood directed his men to stand firm against any attempt at lynching.

At last the prisoners had their turn, but they refused to say more than to ask for delay. If twenty four hours were given them they would prove their identity by one of the best-known men in Colorado, while a little further research in the shape of a telegram to the Mayor of St. Louis, would not be time lost.

Blenker's manner in making these statements plainly impressed the crowd, but Bartlett sprung at once to the front. He knew his power and he used it. He was not eloquent, but he could remind them that he was the richest man in Red Bar, and that his money was of great value to the young town.

"Use me well and I'll use you well!" was the amount of his speech, boiled down.

That settled it. The idea of the millionaire giving Red Bar the cold shoulder sent a chill down the spine of judge, jury, sheriff and all; and almost in the twinkling of an eye the prisoners were found guilty and sentenced to be hanged at sunset.

They hardly realized their position until they found themselves back in the jail.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" observed Blenker, without seeing how appropriate was the word he used, "if that wasn't the first time I was ever sentenced to be hanged. I hardly expected to come to it."

Yet it looked as though they must "come to it." They sent in vain for the sheriff, or the judge, in order to explain all; the officials would not come and the hours went on rapidly.

The prisoners were utterly helpless. No friend came to them and they were even denied the privilege of writing letters; it looked as though they would die and leave no sign which might tell their friends what had been their end.

It will be remembered they had figured at the Bar under assumed names.

One precaution they were able to take. They had been but imperfectly searched at first, and before they came for the second time Blenker had concealed all their private papers about the jail; these might some day arise to accuse Edmund Bartlett.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE HANGMAN'S NOOSE.

THE prisoners passed an anxious day. It will be remembered that they hoped to see the Denver detective that morning, but hours passed and he did not appear. Meanwhile, the hour appointed for the execution drew near, the sun sunk lower in the western sky, and crowds of men, exempt from work for the grand occasion, began to gather near the gallows.

This was quite a pretentious affair, though the principal parts thereof were two tall trees which grew in just the right position for a cross-beam to be run from one to the other.

A little before sunset Sheriff Wood entered the jail with his assistants. He found the prisoners perfectly calm and felt a little thrill of

regret that such brave men were of such villainous inclinations.

"I've got ter take you out," he said, awkwardly.

"Don't trouble yourself; we had as soon stay here," the ex-detective grimly said.

"They're waiting for you," Wood added.

"Oh! are they? I suppose it is a regular holiday in Red Bullet Bar?"

"Oh, yes," was the quick reply, for Mr. Wood thought he saw a chance to console his victims, "and we ain't never had a hangin' at the Bar before where the condemned drew so big a crowd as you have!"

It was a heavy compliment, but the doomed men were not in condition to properly appreciate it.

Wood led the way toward the gallows and the prisoners followed, walking between his assistants with firm steps. That peculiar state natural to men thus situated, and variously called "bravery," "gameness" and "a dulled condition of the senses," enabled them to look their destroyers in the face without wavering.

They were marched under the gallows, from which the ropes already dangled, and Sheriff Wood invited himself to deliver a little oration. Neither prisoner paid any attention to it, though dimly aware that he was pronouncing their career a "terrible example," they were looking for Edmund Bartlett.

They did not see him; if he was enjoying the scene, it was from a less prominent place.

Finally, all was ready for the last act. The nooses were adjusted over the necks of the condemned, and then followed a sort of bag which completely hid their faces and heads and were tied under their chins—this being Red Bar's substitute for the professional black cap.

All was then ready; it only remained to pull on the ropes and Edmund Bartlett would be minus two enemies.

Sheriff Wood gave the signal and the ropes tightened. Allen and Blenker were swaying in mid-air.

At that moment, however, a chorus of wild yells arose from the rear of the crowd, and, looking around, they were startled to see a band of horsemen sweeping toward them with the speed and wildness of Indians; a party numbering fully thirty men, each one splendidly armed and bearing a gleaming revolver in each hand.

It was unnecessary to tell the men of Red Bar who the horsemen were.

"Bullet Head! Bullet Head!" shouted a score of voices; and the words had a ring of fear which did not speak very well for the bravery of the Red-Barites.

No time was there for thought and little for preparation, for the road-agents were near at hand with their chief at the lead. For once his mask was off, but there was no doubt about his identity. At his right hand some of the men recognized Wicked William.

The bravest of the villagers drew revolvers, but when it was seen that the Bravo's men were going to charge between the gallows-trees there was a simultaneous scattering of those who held the ropes, and as a result Blenker came to the ground in a heap.

Allen was less fortunate, for the loose end of his own rope had caught on something and he remained swinging.

Then it was that Bullet Head thrust his revolvers back into his belt and arose with cat-like agility to his saddle. Once there he remained standing perfectly erect and without support, his horse going at full speed, and jerked his bowie-knife from his belt.

"Fire!"

Giving the order sharply, but himself disregarding it, Bullet Head swept forward like a flash, his knife-hand raised and his gaze fixed on the swaying figure.

There was a moment of suspense, enlivened by the crash of revolvers and the yells of angry and exultant men—a truly Western scene—and then Bullet Head's knife cut the rope, the swaying body fell and, caught by several stout outlaws, was borne away in triumph.

The Red-Barites were no cowards, and as soon as they were sure they were not to be trampled under foot they rallied for work, but the road-agents were gone.

Without having once paused for an instant, they were speeding away toward the mountains.

Then there was weeping and wailing in Red Bar, to speak figuratively, for it was found that not only had the outlaws' lead done deadly work, but both of the condemned men were gone; and when Mr. Edmund Bartlett appeared on the scene and learned all this he nearly made the miners blush with his profanity.

In the mean while, the road-agents were retreating safely. Bullet Head had resumed his mask as soon as he cut down Allen, and the rough riders were working over the rescued men.

Wicked William, who had saved Blenker by leaning down from his saddle and picking him up in fine style, had elevated his whisky-flask but once when that worthy man opened his eyes; but Allen was not so easily resuscitated.

Still, he had hung but a comparatively short period, and by the time they reached the foot of the mountains he, too, recovered.

Blenker had already taken the precaution to question Wicked William, who had told what the reader already knows, but who had thrown the ex-detective into the deepest perplexity by describing how Bullet Head received the news of their peril.

"He heered me quiet-like, but I c'u'd see his eyes a-glintin' ahind his mask, an' he sez:

"'We'll hev them out on't or reduce ther Bar ter ashes.'

"'Puffectly fit an' proper,' sez I encouragin'ly.

"'I'll make ther place howl,' sez he.

"'I hopes as how you'll let ther red slayer slay,' sez I; but he ariz an' went out, and purty soon I found that they were preparin' fur ther raid."

Blenker was greatly perplexed by this account. If Bullet Head was anxious they should die, and his course at the ravine during the storm could be construed no other way, why had he now rescued them?

The question remained unanswered when, an hour later, the return to the cave having been safely made, the Bravo sent for them to join him in his private room.

Both had entirely recovered from their hanging.

The Bravo motioned to Goliath, who placed chairs for them, and then abruptly said:

"It is necessary for us to have some talk as to the future. First of all, are you willing to make this cave your home for a while? Of course you will be free to come and go as you see fit, and when you have promised not to betray us I shall feel safe to leave you unwatched, the only restriction being that you shall use the same precautions to baffle outsiders that we ourselves use."

The detective and his friend remembered the affair at the ravine and did not feel like accepting the offer; besides, it looked altogether too full to be sincere.

"I fear our business will call us elsewhere," said Allen.

"Not to Red Bar, however, if I am any judge," said the chief, his beard moving in a smile.

"Not openly, but we shall return there, in some shape or other," said Allen, firmly, a stern look crossing his face.

"I suppose you are thinking of Bartlett. I wish to speak of that affair, also; in fact, I have been anxiously awaiting a chance. I don't like Bartlett, myself; in fact, I believe he has made way with a man in whom I am interested; and I am ready to help you in any attempt against him. You overrated my knowledge the other day. I do not know how Reginald Sinclair died, but if you want a place to compel Bartlett to tell, my cave is at your service."

"Pardon me," said the ex-detective, slowly, "but are you not Thomas Quain?"

The Bravo hesitated.

"I won't deny it," he said, slowly, after a pause.

"Then don't you know how Sinclair died?"

"I do not."

"Where did you get the baby you brought to your home that night?"

"From one who gave me no clew to its parentage. Perhaps if he could be found we might not only learn who the babe was but where Robert Sinclair now is."

Allen started to his feet.

"What?" he cried, excitedly.

Bullet Head calmly repeated what he said.

"Do you mean to say Robert Sinclair lives?"

"I am not sure," the outlaw answered. "If I can find the man for whom I am searching I believe I can say to you, 'Robert Sinclair lives!' but as I have before said I am afraid Bartlett has put him out of the way."

"Who is, or was, this man?"

Bullet Head hesitated.

"Well, it was Sinclair himself!"

The announcement fell with startling force upon the hearer, but Blenker preserved his coolness.

"Did you see him?"

"Yes. He came to Red Bullet Bar and I had some talk with him. He acknowledged, without suspecting Tom Quain was near him, that he feared for his life, but I was not prepared for the quickness with which the blow fell. The next morning he was missing from his hotel."

"Kidnapped by Bartlett?"

"Possibly he secretly left the town of his own accord, but I fear that Bartlett put him out of the way, as I before said."

And this was the amount of all that Bullet Head had to say. He seemed to talk freely and frankly, and they were almost inclined to believe him, but at all times they felt a vague suspicion that he was speaking without a shadow of truth.

He did not once refer to the affair in the ravine, so they did not mention it, but his show of friendship after that affair looked decidedly unreliable.

Allen had never been more stirred up mentally. Had he really been near where Robert Sinclair had trod only a few days before? It did not seem possible; viewing everything calmly, he was forced to admit that it looked as though Bullet Head was playing some deep game against him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MORE TROUBLE FOR MR. BARTLETT.

THE going-down of the sun brought little consolation to Edmund Bartlett. He had fondly hoped to see his two enemies hanged and buried by nightfall; but the unexpected interference of Bullet Head had seriously disarranged his plans.

Allen and Blenker were once more at liberty, and with an unbounded will and power for doing mischief.

Having convinced all the village people that they were actually members of the Bravo's band, he went back to the house. If he felt any longing for the fair girl who had so long been his light, and whom he had doomed to such a fate, he gave no sign, and his appetite for supper was excellent.

He and Hester Ware had the table to themselves. Foolish Joe had reappeared; but he always ate in the kitchen, dog-fashion, and no one except Bartlett noticed him.

"Uncle," said Hester, as the meal neared an end, "what sort of a place is that on the east side of the cellar?"

She asked the question carelessly, without even looking at him; but he at once started, and his knife went clattering to the floor. He had the presence of mind to employ some time in picking it up, but even his face bore a scared look which did not escape her notice.

His start would have put a less observing person on the alert.

"What place?" he managed to ask, coolly.

"Really, I don't know what you call it. I was moving a lot of trash in the store room, and thus discovered an iron ring on the floor. I lifted on it, and a circular hole was revealed in the floor. A puff of air ascended, which was worse than that of a sewer."

Hester had resumed her careless manner, but she was watching Bartlett closely, and she saw that he was a good deal disturbed. Naturally, he was alarmed, for all of her assertions of loyalty did not reconcile him to the idea of her knowing the secret of the iron vault.

He had believed it securely fastened, but something had occurred to undo the work.

"You have made a good comparison," he said. "There is a drain there. This spot of land has an oil element, which would otherwise render it useless. I had a drain made, which passes under one corner of the house, and 'twas that which tainted the air. There are rats in there half as large as a cat."

The last statement was made after a pause, and because he feared that his new heiress might take a fancy to explore the vault.

What he said seemed to satisfy her, however, for no more was said; but the mine-owner did not forget it.

After supper he secretly called one of his Chinamen, and took him to the store-room. There he placed him on guard at the door, directing him to watch well for intruders.

Bartlett had already procured a lantern and pole, and he tied the former to one end of the latter, and then raised the cover of the vault.

Hester had not exaggerated when she spoke of the air—it was nearly overpowering; and Bartlett blessed the chance which made the oil-scent he had referred to of such strength as to counteract all else which might similarly arise.

"Dead!" he muttered, darkly; "dead, a long while ago!"

He lost little time, but lowering the lantern, speedily had a dim light in the vault, which was greatly aided by the white walls.

That light revealed a pail on the floor, and near it a long-handled paint-brush; and it also fell on two dark objects, one on each side of the vault, which looked marvelously like a man in shape. They were, however, prostrate and motionless, and the foulness of the air quickly caused the mine-owner to retreat.

"Dead!" he again muttered. "Robert Sinclair is off the stage forever."

He secured the vault cover with extra care, moving the secret fastenings, which somewhat resembled a combination lock, until he was sure he could defy Hester's prying curiosity. Then, dismissing his servant, he left the place.

Half an hour later a visitor was announced. He came in, and Bartlett's face darkened at sight of Crisp, alias Lieutenant Darke.

"Good Heavens! what is wrong?" he demanded.

"Wrong?" repeated the caller, as though uncomprehendingly.

"Yes, wrong. You should be fifty miles away. Why are you here?"

Crisp tipped back in his chair in a contented fashion.

"I changed my mind," he calmly replied.

"After I left here I decided that there was no earthly good in my running away. Why not marry Lila here as well as anywhere else? She was sure to make a row, anyhow, so I couldn't see the sense of going beyond the limits of civilization."

"Where is she now?"

"Up in the mountain, in a hut."

"But, where?"

"Excuse me one moment. Do you approve of what I have done?"

"Decidedly not. Some meddling fool will be

stumbling on the cabin and releasing her, and then there'll be a breeze."

"What can she do?"

Darke was watching his future father-in-law closely. A hasty, angry reply trembled on his lips, but to the lieutenant's disgust he checked it and more calmly answered:

"She is liable to betray us both."

"She can betray me, if she sees fit, and welcome, for I have a way of looking out for myself. I didn't cut loose from my base of supplies when I eloped with the fair Lila, and I can fall back on that and laugh at what she may say. As for you, what harm can she do you?"

Bartlett looked sullenly at his companion, unheeding the question, a full minute before he spoke.

"Crisp," he then said, tersely, "what scheme have you planned? Come to business!"

"I will, my dear sir. You see, I had no sooner got clear of Red Bullet Bar, after stealing Lila, than it occurred to me that I was a fool to give up my income here for the thousand dollars you gave me. Again, why should I run away from a rich father-in-law?"

"In plain words, you returned because you saw more money in such a move?"

"I have confessed it," the lieutenant coolly acknowledged.

"And you hope to secure my wealth through Lila?"

"Possibly."

"Your hopes are vain."

"So you will disinherit her?"

"No."

"No? What then?"

"She is not my daughter, nor my heiress!"

Crisp sat in speechless amazement for a moment, and then an angry flush passed over his face.

"That's a lie!" he bluntly exclaimed.

"I swear that it is the truth. Didn't it occur to you as being singular that a man should doom his own daughter to such a fate as I worked out for Lila when I sold her to you? She is not my daughter. True, she has been reared as such, but such things are common. As an adopted child she did well enough until she displeased me. When that day came I resolved to get rid of her, and I've done it if you carry out the contract. Do you see now that you can never inherit a dollar of my money except what I see fit to give you?"

Darke did see; he was not fool enough to threaten the rich man of Red Bar, and he sat in silence, except for an indistinct muttering.

"If it's money you want, perhaps we can still agree," continued Bartlett, feeling the game in his hands. "Will you hear my offer?"

"Yes."

"You don't seem very anxious to marry Lila or you would have been fifty miles away and a Benedict before this. Now, I have another offer."

"What is it?"

"I am my own master and I won't submit to black-mail to the extent of a dollar. If you want to go to Sheriff Wood and make a charge against me, go. I'll wager something I put you in an insane asylum as your reward."

"Hold on!" Crisp exclaimed; "I don't intend to try it. I throw up the sponge, so to speak."

"Very good then. I will give you another thousand dollars whenever you will convince me that the girl *will never come back*."

The millionaire leaned forward and whispered the last words, but as Darke caught their meaning he started back.

"What!" he exclaimed, in horror. "What do you take me for, you old rascal? Do you suppose I would murder a woman? Never—not for all your gold; never!"

He spoke with real indignation, for, villain that he was, he had no taste for such a cowardly crime as the one proposed, but Bartlett smiled coldly.

"You have come here on business," he observed, "and business you shall have. You will accept my offer—or take the consequences."

"I'll do the latter then."

"Softly! If you decline, you will never leave this house alive!"

Darke looked really uneasy. He knew something about the mysterious disappearance which so interested his chief, Bullet Head, and he did not know what kind of man-traps might be yawning around him.

"Of course you are at liberty to choose," added Bartlett, his gaze fixed significantly on Crisp's face.

"Tell me what you want," said the latter, sullenly.

"You say you have the girl in a hut on the mountain. Very well; I'll give you a drug which will end her earthly career forever, and when it's done you can summon me to the hut to see her. That will satisfy me you are sincere, and then you shall have your money."

"Demon!" Darke could not avoid exclaiming.

"A waste of breath. Do you accept or decline?"

Darke instinctively looked down at his feet, as though expecting to see a trap-door yawning for him; then, with a shiver, he replied:

"Yes."

"Very well; I'll get the drug."

Bartlett spoke serenely and left the room in search of Ki Lee. On the way he snapped his fingers and contemptuously observed:

"Half the men of this world were born to be led by the nose!"

His work with Ki Lee was soon finished and he returned to the other room. Darke was sitting where he left him, but his expression was not that of a happy man. He brushed his face with his hand, as though to remove the perspiration, and stared mutely at the package in Bartlett's hand.

"Here is the article," said the latter, as he extended it. "Do not let a grain pass your lips, for it is deadly poison!"

Darke held out his own hand, but at that moment a third one glided over Bartlett's shoulder, the package was snatched away and a triumphant laugh rung in their ears.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BARTLETT WHEELS HIS TEETH.

BARTLETT wheeled like a flash and Darke sprung to his feet, for such an interruption coming to a compact of murder was certainly enough to startle any one.

What they saw was by no means encouraging.

A rather short, stoutly-built man stood before them, holding the package aloft and looking as triumphant as his laugh had sounded.

Darke, though he had never seen his captain's face, was not slow to recognize the form; he knew Bullet Head stood before him.

Bartlett did not at once recover his self-possession. How much of his dangerous remarks had this man heard? Again, who was he? There was something familiar about his face, but Bartlett could not place it.

"Hallo!" the intruder finally exclaimed, "how are you, my good friends? I just dropped in for a little chat. Ed Bartlett, you can't keep out of mischief to save your soul, can you?"

"Give me that paper!" cried Bartlett hotly.

"Couldn't think of it, my dear fellow. I want this; it may be the means of hanging you some day."

"Beware! I will call my servants!"

"Call them if you see fit, but first let me say I am heeled to the chin."

He threw open his coat revealing two heavy revolvers and a knife, and then pointed to Darke.

"Furthermore, that man fights on my side. There isn't a ghost of a chance for you. I'll keep this poison; you get some more if you want to poison Miss Lila."

The schemer stood aghast. Here were two witnesses of his infamous offer; he began to see the gallows looming up and made a dash for the door; but with a quickness and strength which was surprising Bullet Head caught and flung him back.

"Stay there!" he ordered. "I didn't come here to play. I am your master, Bartlett, and I'll prove it. Carefully, now, or I'll tell all about the Sinclair affair!"

Again that ominous subject was thrown into his face! He looked at his assailant with gathering alarm.

"Who—who are you?" he gasped.

"Ha! ha! you had better ask. Well, if it'll do you any good, my name is Tom Quain!"

Bartlett's hands dropped to his side. After twenty years of peace and enjoyment of his fortune, inherited from Reginald Sinclair, every one that knew of his old life seemed jumping into the arena to shout that crime of old in his ears.

And Tom Quain! He had good reason to fear him more than any one else on earth. He was there, and as an enemy, and his voice would make serious trouble.

In St. Louis his wealth would not bend all mankind as in the narrow limits of Red Bullet Bar.

His distress was so comical that Bullet Head laughed again, while Darke, though he feared the Bravo would end by doing him harm, enjoyed it considerably, himself.

"Didn't expect to see me, did you?" Quain resumed, after a pause. "Well, of course I am not less welcome. Between old friends there should be no coldness."

"Malediction!" hissed the mine-owner, "what evil genius brought you here?"

"Why, you seem to insinuate that I've come a long distance. Possibly you imagine I am consul to Australia, or prime minister to some South Sea king! No; I have been at your very elbow for the last year or two. Am I right, my good Mr. Crisp?"

"Yes, sir," said the latter, meekly.

"There you have it, Edmund. Yes, I've been near you, but it was not until this evening that I saw fit to drop in on you. My gay friend, I see you haven't given up your old ways. Cold poison for one, and that one a girl, young, pretty and unsuspecting. Ed, you're a rascal!"

Bullet Head spoke banteringly, even to the end, but his words were like whips to Bartlett. Every moment he expected to hear the truth about the Sinclair case flung forth for Crisp's ears to drink in, and he began to perspire as

freely as he had made the lieutenant a little before.

"It is all right, Mr. Quain," he finally hastened to say, "and I am glad to see you. Just step into the next room while I speak with this gentleman, please."

"Nonsense, Ed! Let him remain with us. I say, My Crisp-y friend, you don't object, do you? You won't turn pale when we talk of poison, revolvers and bowie-knives, will you?"

The facetious Bravo punched his lieutenant under the arm so forcibly as to almost knock out his breath, but Darke dared do no more than to faintly murmur an affirmative.

"But I wish to speak with you in private," urged Bartlett.

"There should be no privacy among friends. Crisp, here, is discreet; give breath to your secrets. Explain why you wish to poison Lila; tell how Reginald Sinclair died; reveal the history of the last days of Albert Leverett, carpenter, and Abram Belford, otherwise named Robert Sinclair!"

The laughing mood of the Bravo had changed. His face, which had a power that almost made amends for its brutality, had grown stern and menacing. He stood erect, and poured forth his terrible words like fiery bolts.

Bartlett had grown paler still, but he made a desperate effort to stem the tide.

"Stop!" he cried; "I command you to stop!"

"Bab! go talk to the wind; it'll mind you as well as I. You smooth-coated murderer, you crawling viper! what do you expect? I know you, and I'm not afraid to talk. Why, for a dollar I'd go to St. Louis, and say, 'I am Tom Quain; I know how Reginald Sinclair died!' Take care, old man, that I don't talk!"

Maddened beyond endurance, Bartlett snatched a revolver from his pocket—it was the same silver-mounted affair we have before seen—and attempted to pull the trigger.

The result was a surprise for him.

There was a report from in front, and his weapon went flying across the room; Bullet Head had accomplished the feat of shooting from his pocket, and he had shot well.

"You'll find it well to take it to a locksmith before using it again, as the hammer is blown away," observed Quain.

Bartlett did not answer; but glanced furtively toward the door. He knew the revolver shot would be investigated by his Chinamen, and as they would fight well under his eye, he expected to make trouble for his enemy before the interview ended.

Bullet Head, however, was equally quick-witted. Seeing the secret glance, he strode to the mine-owner's side, and seizing his arm in a crushing grasp, menaced him with his yawning Smith & Wesson.

"If any one comes to the door to inquire what that shot meant, you will explain that you accidentally discharged your revolver. Do you hear?"

Bartlett did hear, and he gave the promise just as Hester rapped and made the expected inquiry. Menaced by Quain, his former ally answered as directed, and the woman went away, satisfied, or otherwise.

"You will repent this before we are done," the old man huskily said.

"Perhaps you hope to put me out of the way as you did Abram Belford."

"I don't know the man."

"What did you do with him?"

"I repeat—"

"I repeat that you are a liar! You kidnapped him; took him from the hotel, and very likely put him under the sod. That was a cowardly work, Bartlett; a deed worthy of a demon. Oh! you wretch," he added, grinding his firm teeth, "you ought to be torn to pieces on the rack for that!"

Bartlett smiled coldly; he felt sure the iron vault would keep its secret even as it kept its victims.

"Go on; my day will come," he said.

"It is here already, but it is waning never to brighten again. You'll soon come up with a short turn. Right here, let me ask who this girl, Lila, is. You have reared her as your daughter, but you declare she is not that. Who, then, is she?"

"I decline to state."

"Oh! you do. Well, it may be you will glibly chirrup all you know about her, rather than hang for trying to kill her. I am tempted to take you to—a safe place and *make* you talk, but I'll wait awhile. I'm going now and Crisp is going with me. Your negotiations with him on the poison question are broken off for awhile. In the meanwhile, *follow us if you dare!*"

Bartlett lacked a good deal of being a coward, but he shivered at the closing words. The bulldog nature of the Bravo came to the front and he snarled and showed his teeth in like fashion. His victim receded a step and hastened to declare that he would remain silent.

He kept his word. Bullet Head and his lieutenant went together, sliding out of the wind, but Bartlett was shrewd enough to suspect that the former would linger where he could watch, and he had no taste for wild lead.

In this he was right, but the road-agents were at last clear of the house and the village.

"Darke," said his chief, abruptly, "you've been playing a fine game, haven't you?"

"I thought so at the time," nervously replied the lieutenant.

"You are aware, of course, that your life is forfeited according to the rules of our band?"

"Yes."

"Well, I must say you are a fool."

"So I am," said Darke; "a most infernal, mule-headed fool. I expect to lose my head, but I'll tell you how it was."

He then explained how he had been tempted to abduct Lila and why he had remained near Red Bar.

"Who is this girl?" the Bravo demanded.

"I don't know; I am inclined to think he lied and that she is his own."

"No; I have reason to believe she is not. He was too cold, miserly and mean to burden himself with a family in the old days; and that's one reason why I can't understand why he should adopt this girl."

The words were musingly spoken and then the Bravo suddenly aroused.

"Where is she now?" he asked.

"In a hut on the north side of the mountain."

"Are you willing to surrender her to me?"

"Yes. I'm beat at this game and I know enough to acknowledge it. If I save my head I shall be satisfied."

"Well, I'm rather sorry to rob you of the girl, but I have taken an interest in her and want to know who she is. Deal squarely with me, Crisp, and I'll do the same by you. Lead the way to the hut."

Darke promptly obeyed and the journey was begun.

It was a rough and far from pleasant one. Their way lay along the mountain side where Nature had arranged matters in her most wayward fashion. The clouded moon gave but a poor light and for less practiced feet than theirs it would have been dangerous, but they had toiled over the mountain many a time.

Little talking was done on the journey, but at last the lieutenant paused and pointed ahead.

"She's in there!"

Bullet Head knew the locality well. Several miners had attempted to find the auriferous soil in a canyon at that point, but, failing, they departed and left a dozen cabins as a relic of their attempt and failure.

"She's in the first one," said Darke.

"Go on!" was the terse answer.

They went, but Darke again paused at the door.

"Perhaps I had better go in first and give her warning to prepare for visitors," he suggested.

The idea was so reasonable that the Bravo assented. His subordinate entered and he leaned against the hut and looked thoughtfully to where the highest peak of the mountain was touched by the full glow of moonlight until the dark eminence seemed to have a white cap.

Bullet Head was not an imaginative man, but on this occasion he fell into thought and forgot himself. When he aroused it was to wonder at Darke's slowness. He gave him another half minute and then rapped at the door.

There was no answer.

He repeated the summons, but silence reigned as before. A suspicion flashed over his mind and he pulled the door wide open. He had taken the precaution to stand well back, for there was a possibility that some one might be in ambush, but the sight of an open window at the rear confirmed his suspicions.

He darted in, but the cabin was empty and gave no sign of having been occupied.

"Tricked!" hissed the Bravo. "Once let me get my eyes on him and he is a dead man!"

He comprehended very well how Darke had accomplished his escape; the leaving of his superior at the door had been a trick and he had passed out of the rear window.

Bullet Head visited the other cabins. In one of them he found a glove, small and delicate enough for a woman's hand, and in another evidence that a horse had been tied there. He cursed his stupidity as he realized that he had been so near the realization of his wishes only to lose all through his unusual carelessness.

"Perhaps the end isn't yet!" he muttered, shaking his fist toward the north. "You'll be a nimble-footed goat if you get clear of me, Jim Darke, and if I catch you I'll make you howl for mercy!"

At the same moment a horseman was riding away from the base of the mountain, carrying a female before him on the saddle, and as he put spurs to his horse he glanced anxiously back toward the mountain.

"I've got to go my level best, now," he muttered, "for it's sure death if Bullet Head gets hold of me again!"

The speaker was Lieutenant Darke.

CHAPTER XXX.

PILGRIMS ON THE ROAD.

The stage from Beaver City to Red Bullet Bar had been gone nearly an hour from the former place when the loungers at the Mixed Pickles Hotel were interested by the approach of

a horse. It was ridden, and doubly ridden, too, for two women clung to its back as it clattered down toward the Mixed Pickles.

The horse seemed to be a little on the sunny side of thirty, in point of years, and he certainly had the bone-works on which to build a good horse, but he had evidently been fed on anti-fat for some time and looked like a skeleton resurrected for the occasion.

Per contra, the lady who managed him was young, plump and beautiful; as rosy a specimen of womankind as had ever been seen in Beaver City. The second rider had seen fifty years and was gray, pale, thin and sad.

"What time is it now?" the latter asked, as they neared the door of Mixed Pickles.

"It lacks ten minutes of stage-time, Mrs. Quain," replied the young lady, consulting her gold watch.

The elderly lady, or Mrs. Quain, as we have heard her called, murmured something which sounded like an expression of pleasure, but her voice was rather faint.

The dilapidated charger came to a halt at the hotel so suddenly as to nearly unhorse the ladies, but the younger one lost no time in making known her business.

"Where can I find the stage for Red Bullet Bar?" she asked, tersely, addressing the nearest lounger.

"'Bout three or four mild out on the trail, I reckon," he said, with due respect.

"What! not gone already?"

"I take et 'tis, fur so they said, but ez I aim ter be right I won't say fur sarting. Boyees, how is it?"

A general response arose to the effect that the stage had indeed been gone for an hour.

"Ther bridge over 'Rastle-water Creek went off ther 'buttments in ther last shower an' Tony Wells hez ter take ther long route 'round Humpty Dumpty Plain," added one of the men, "an' as ther distance is fifteen mild furder he starts an hour 'arlier."

Plainly it was a hard blow to the ladies. They alighted, the frame-work of their horse was taken round to the stable and they entered the hotel.

"Prepare supper at once," said the younger one, "and in the mean while tell us how we can get to Red Bullet Bar."

The landlord didn't know. There wasn't a horse in Beaver City, except those of travelers, and he said he "lowed as how they must go on ez they kin in ef they went a tall."

The young lady thought differently and she appealed to the crowd who had followed her.

"Ef we hed a vehighkle," observed the man whom she had first addressed, "I reckon we might make et work. I hev a hoss in ther stable, an' if he war yoked in 'side o' yourn we c'ud fly ter Red Bar."

The suggestion irrigated the landlord's wits. In his hay-loft was an old stage, cast aside when the new one was put on the road, and possibly that would hold together until Red Bar was reached.

"That hyar is ther chance, miss," said her best friend. "What say, shall we hitch hosses fur ther trip?"

She did not hesitate. The man had a good face, albeit he was homely, ragged, dirty and uncombed, and she caught at his offer. His horse and hers, coupled in the team, would undoubtedly take them through to the Bar and she must not delay.

"What is your name?" she asked, when the bargain was made.

"Gentle John—only one J. You may have heered from me in connection with my bowlin'-alley an' Bad Lung. He's my assistant who sets them up."

"I do not recollect the names, but it is all right. My name is Rose Jackson. Now, can you have the team ready by the time we have finished supper?"

"Beyond a doubt, miss, an' I'll see to it at once. I aim to be right."

When Miss Jackson and Mrs. Quain went to take their conveyance they did not wonder at the amused smiles of the spectators.

A worse-looking vehicle never opened its maw for passengers. Time had left its traces there and the works were deep. Two wheels were red, one green and the third one unpainted; the once-black top was bleached, cracked and ragged, and decay was everywhere.

The horses were of the same rank. The tall, bony beast on which the ladies arrived occupied the "off" side, while at his left was a small, short-legged, plump little beast whose extremely long ears and paint-brush tail were very suggestive.

Altogether, such a team had never before been seen in Beaver City.

"Are we all ready?" Rose asked, her momentary smile vanishing.

"I think we are," answered Gentle John, "though I won't say positivly. I aim ter be right."

The ladies entered the vehicle, their new ally climbed to the box and the outfit moved. Those who had expected to see it stand still were disappointed; it moved. The long-eared pigmy settled right down to work, and the lank giant, cheered by such welcome company, champed

his bits, tried to toss his head and then trotted along cheerfully.

Gentle John knew the route well. He had been all over the West and had tried his hand at nearly every employment; he felt able to take his passengers through if the stage hung together.

The ladies did not address him for some time, for he was busy encouraging his team, but he finally turned around.

"What's ther name o' yer quadrupedal?" he asked, pointing to the off horse.

"I really don't know," Rose answered.

"He must hev some one; what'd be ther correct figger?"

"Oh! anything you think best."

"Et might be Hannibawl or Buttercup," was the perfectly serious reply. "My beast o' burden is named Susan Temple, bein' a blood relation o' Flora. Mebbe I'd better call yourn Buttercup; 'twould be more appropriate fur a lady's hoss."

"Did you see who went in the stage?" Rose abruptly asked.

"Yes; there was three men. Hole on, I won't say sartin' they went, fur I aim ter be right, but I see'd them 'round ther Mixed Pickles an' took it they was goin'."

"Describe them!"

Gentle John did his best. According to his account, two were ordinary miners, or, perhaps, roughs, and the other a tall, slender, pale-faced, serious-looking man, who looked as though he might be a preacher.

"Eben Garland!" exclaimed Rose.

"Yes," sighed Mrs. Quain.

"Pray Heaven we may reach the Bar as soon as he be!"

"Yes," again said the elder lady.

"Do you regret coming?"

"No; though I know if Thomas ever hears of this he will kill me. You don't know his temper. Much as I fear him, however, I will dare him and Eben for my foster-son."

"True," said Rose, with energy. "Allen must be saved."

And then the outfit rolled on, the passengers scarcely speaking, but with Gentle John busily talking to "Susan" and "Buttercup," and the ill-mated span ambled cheerfully over the road.

At the same time the regular stage was three miles in advance. It was going no faster than that behind, for Tony Wells wasn't the man to injure his horses when it was unnecessary.

By the loss of the Wrestle-water Creek bridge his route was so lengthened that he could not reach the Bar before eleven o'clock anyhow, and he intended to roll in at just midnight.

Inside the stage were just the passengers whom Gentle John had described; the two rough-looking fellows and the sober-faced man in broadcloth.

The latter was Eben Garland, attorney-at-law, of St. Louis, a man whose name will not be unfamiliar to the reader.

Mr. Garland did not like the extreme West. From the time he left Kansas City he had been a coward. Accustomed to city life, he felt able to meet and hold his own with any of the smooth-tongued rascals of St. Louis, but the knife and revolver desperado was to him worse than a hideous nightmare; he was a serpent with undrawn fangs.

Hence, the lawyer was miserable from the moment he entered the stage. His rough companions were typical roughs, and he thought of all the famous outlaws of whom he had read and shivered. His companions were friends, and called each other "Ned" and "Sam;" worse than this, they were armed to the teeth; they drank a good deal of whisky and were boisterous and unpleasant.

The lawyer, however, tried his best to give no offense and several miles were passed without disturbance.

Night drew near and twilight gave place to darkness, but the stage rolled steadily on under Tony's skillful care. Trouble was brewing, however, and the first symptom came when one of the horses fell lame.

Tony looked for a cause in the shape of a stone against the hoof or something of the kind, but failing to find it, treated his passengers to a few choice selections from the Western language. He had paid a good round sum for the horse, and it was certainly hard to see him thus get out of condition.

Tony, however, was a merciful man, and he began to unhitch his horses.

"What are you going to do?" Mr. Garland hurriedly asked.

"Camp," was the brief reply.

"For how long?"

"Till that hoss comes out on't."

"But he may never come out of it."

"Then we may never leave."

And Tony went on with his camping preparations, turning a deaf ear to all that Garland said. Even an offer of twenty-five dollars, in case they reached the Bar at midnight, was of no avail.

Tony had said he was going to camp and he meant business.

The lawyer was amazed at the delay in reaching the Bar and alarmed at the prospect of a

night with Ned and Sam. It was bad enough to journey with them until twelve o'clock, but to camp all night was terrible. He would not dare to close his eyes, and even then he would be at their mercy.

What could he do against two bloodthirsty fellows who were so ominously armed?

He would have appealed to Tony, but the desperadoes had already made friends with him; he had drank heartily from their whisky-flasks, and very likely he was off the same piece.

Reasoning thus, Eben stood shivering by the stage and sincerely wishing he was back in St. Louis.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE TROUBLES OF A NIGHT.

TONY'S camp was peaceful if not quiet. The stage had been drawn to such a point that, aided by bowlders, it formed a corral for the horses, and close at hand the men were in a group. Eben longed to go apart and get clear of his wild companions, for Sam and Tony had imbibed of whisky until they were noisy, reckless and dangerous, but visions of Indians, jaguars and, possibly, boa-constrictors, floated through the lawyer's brain and he dared not move.

As has been said, Tony and Sam were going from bad to worse under the power of the whisky. Of that potent article Eben drank none and Ned very little.

Ned, in fact, seemed of a better piece than his companion, and he soon ceased to talk and lay silently on the ground, devoting his time to the pipe which he evidently loved. Now and then it almost looked as though disgust were pictured on his dirt-covered face; but his nature was plainly too bold to allow him to feel fear like Garland.

Two hours passed. Tony and Sam told tales of the trail and struggled hard for the title of champion falsifier. Justice compels us to say it was a tie.

Nothing, however, except total unconsciousness could deaden Tony's sense of hearing, and he suddenly put up his hand to call for silence.

All listened, and on the air came a sound which would have puzzled all except Tony, so strange, weird and soul-harrowing did it seem.

He, however, was not at fault.

"Thunderation!" he said, blankly; and then, after a pause of a few seconds, "A wagon on the Catnip Trail! What sent it here?"

It was surprising, since no one, except himself, had ever taken a vehicle through to Red Bullet Bar, and all forgot the fact that the screaming of the wheels betrayed a great need of grease, in their curiosity to know who their fellow-travelers were.

The squeak grew nearer, until Sam ran his fingers into his ears; but it ceased suddenly, and there was peace on the Catnip Trail.

Ten minutes passed, and no further sound was heard.

Tony raised his head.

"Wait, will ye? I think they have camped; I'll go and see."

He went, and returned in due time.

"A party o' three," he said; "an' you kin use my head fur a football, ef they aint got my old stage—the one I'd throw'd by, you see. I was mad enough to sail in an' exterminate them all, but I thought I'd come here first."

"What are they?" Sam asked.

"What are they, do you ask? A man and two females. He had a lantern, an' I see'd jewels a-glitterin' on ther persons of the females—gold, silver, diamonds, and rubies. What do you think of that? I tell ye, that's a rich train!"

Every one understood the meaning of the last clause, but only Sam made reply.

"More stuff they've stole," he said, plausibly. "Be you goin' ter stand that, Tony?"

"Nary time. I'm goin' ter hev them back. Like ez not ther jewels was stole from my wife."

Considering that Tony was a bachelor, the theory was not one of exact sincerity.

Ned was looking grave enough, and he raised his voice to laugh the matter down. He made a cunning little speech, and said something about having the driver of the other stage arrested when they reached Red Bullet Bar; but it was of no use.

All that was evil in the natures of Sam and Tony was at the front, and it was clear that mischief was afoot.

They soon bluntly announced their intention of descending on the other camp to recover the stage, and Ned knew that a scene of horror would follow if it was done.

He took Sam aside and talked to him earnestly. It was in vain—the ruffian would not yield.

Ned glanced at Eben. The old lawyer sat cowering in the shade of the wagon, never raising his voice for fear he would become the object of the ruffian's fury; and Ned turned away again.

No hope from such a coward.

Tony and Sam departed, like a pair of wolves creeping on a sleeping camp.

Ned lay quietly for several seconds, but, just as Eben was about to propose that they appropriate the stage and make good their own

escape, he arose and followed them without a word.

Garland could hardly believe his good fortune; he was free from the presence of the three and with the stage in his grasp, as it were. He waited about a minute, and then sprung for the horses.

It never occurred to him that he would be committing robbery by taking them; he forgot all else in a mad desire to escape from the place.

He knew as much about a horse as he did about turning a double-somersault over five mammoth elephants, but he was going to experiment with the one as he would have done with the other if he had believed it necessary.

Somehow he had secured them to the pole and to each other, and then, mounting the box, he held the reins in one hand and swung the whip with the other.

Just at that moment a revolver-shot rung out on the air, quickly followed by a second and a third. Really, they sounded from the direction of the second camp, but Eben's fears magnified the danger; he believed they were close at hand, and even fancied he heard the whistle of the bullets.

The wildest terror seized him and he brought the whip down with a cutting stroke which made the spirited horses bound like frightened deer. This was just what the lawyer wanted, and he repeated the stroke again and again.

By the time he was satisfied to sink back on the seat again matters were quite lively in that section.

The lame horse had forgotten his trouble and both were going at the top of their speed, impelled by fear to a pace which was terrific. At first they had been on smooth ground, but small stones began to be found and the result may be imagined. The stage, striking these obstacles, bounced about in ball-fashion and swayed violently from side to side.

Eben was delighted, and as he sat on the box and held his hands almost to the level of his nose, with a loose rein beyond, he felt a thrill of exultation and imagined himself an accomplished driver.

Anon, however, it occurred to him that he had probably distanced his enemies and that it would be a good idea to moderate his pace somewhat. He pulled on the reins, but the horses paid no attention. He pulled again, and yet again, but they kept on at their break-neck speed and the stage swung along the trail almost like a top.

"Whoa, Bill!" said the lawyer, persuasively; "whoa, good boy! Hold up, there! Good fellows; excellent fellows! Whoa-a-a!"

His voice began to tremble a little as he realized that he had a pair of runaways under his hands, and he hadn't the slightest idea what he must do to stop them.

A veteran driver would have been in nearly as much of a dilemma had he known the state of affairs. When once the horses were on the pole Eben found several loose straps near their necks. Really, they were the ends of the reins which should have been snapped into the bit-rings, but he failed to catch the idea and simply tied them together as useless straps.

As a result, he was exhausting all his strength against the shoulders of the horses.

On, on went the flying team, and Eben's alarm increased. He wished himself on the ground, but dared not jump. His hat had long since dropped off and his false teeth, at last accounts, had gone rattling down on the pole, thence to the ground.

With his eyes dilated and his jaws bumping together, the modern John Gilpin went on his way.

Finally, he had a brilliant idea. If he could not safely leap off in front he would at least stand a chance by dropping off behind. He could clamber over the seats, cut his way through the canvas and stand a chance for his life.

He was about to make the attempt when, without due warning, one wheel of the stage struck against a bowlder, and in a moment more Eben arose in the air and sped forward into space almost as gracefully as a shooting star.

In the mean while, what had transpired at the second camp-fire?

When Ned left his own he fully intended to follow close at the heels of Tony and Sam and warn the other campers of their danger, but he had not gone half the distance when he became aware that he had lost the ruffians in the darkness.

The discovery was an alarming one, for he did not know exactly where the camp was and might miss it in the darkness, but he at once started hurriedly forward.

At the end of a hundred yards he knew he had gone astray, but as he paused in irresolution several revolver shots rung out on the air sounding from the right.

Ned felt a thrill of horror, for they seemed the death-note of the hapless male camper, but he remembered that the women were still left and he dashed to the rescue.

Perhaps half a dozen shots had been fired, but all had become silent and he was so ignorant of

the position of the others that he had not seen any sign of them when he tripped and fell over some object in his way. He did not imagine it was a human being until it rolled over and seized him in a tenacious grasp.

Another moment and a heavy knee was on his breast.

"I aim ter be right," said a voice, "but I should say they're all down but nine."

By this time Ned had made out the outlines of a wagon and he caught at the truth.

"Let me up!" he said, hurriedly. "I am not an enemy. Has this camp been attacked? I was coming to your aid—"

He had dropped his own illiterate style of speaking, but his manner seemed convincing to his captor.

"Set 'em up ag'in," he said, and then he removed his knee and helped him to his feet. "I reckon as how I know ye," he added.

He pronounced a name and then Ned exclaimed:

"Gentle John, as sure as life!"

"Right you are, though them galoots nigh bowled me off the alley. They rushed in, we slung lead promiscuous an' I got a stunner in ther head. Now, I'm awake, but whar's them as tackled me an' whar's ther women?"

"Those ruffians have seized them, but never mind. I know which way they will head, and do you follow me. We'll rescue them or die trying, though I hate to fight against— But, who were the women?"

"One Rose Jackson an' Mrs. Quain, ter wit."

"Who?" cried Ned, excitedly.

Gentle John repeated the names.

"Mrs. Quain!" repeated Ned. "She here? No; it can't be possible; and yet, why not?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

BULLET HEAD HAS A SURPRISE.

GENTLE JOHN'S female passengers had indeed fallen into the hands of Sam and Tony. Carried away despite their struggles, they were wholly helpless when once on the way, and, believing their protector had been effectually silenced, the ruffians bore them toward their own camp.

Much to Tony's surprise he had trouble in finding it. Under the influence of liquor as he was, he was still clear-headed, but the camp unaccountably evaded his search; he was surprised that he could not see a pair of horses and a wagon.

The women were forced to wander about in that haphazard quest, but at last Tony abruptly paused.

"Here's ther s'ile," he said, "but whar's ther wagon an' ther horses?"

"You're mistook, old man," said Sam.

"I ain't mistook. Hyar's ther bowlder we backed up ag'in, I tell ye. These other fellers have run away with them!"

There was a profane addition to the assertion, which told how much in earnest the driver was.

"Ned wouldn't do it," said Sam, sturdily.

"He has!" shouted Tony. "Ther thief has stole them!"

Whatever Sam's faults, he seemed loyal to his partner, and an angry controversy followed; one we do not care to record here, and which filled Rose and Mrs. Quain with additional alarm.

Truly, they had fallen among hard companions.

Sam and Tony forgot that they had drank from the same flask, and the quarrel went from bad to worse. The lie was given, resented and followed by a blow, and then they released their prisoners and grappled.

Rose did not fail to see their chance, and catching Mrs. Quain by the arm she hurried her away. The elder woman went automatically, never replying when addressed, but Rose was in earnest, and their flying feet soon placed a considerable distance between them and the camp.

They saw and heard no more of their late captors, but their strength began to fail, and Rose finally allowed her wavering companion to halt where half a dozen trees formed a grove.

Both were alarmed, for such events were new and not to their taste, but Rose began to consider what should be done next.

"I believe I shall leave you and try to regain our team," she said. "Our unfortunate driver is doubtless dead, for I saw him fall, but the team was left. If I can get that we can go on to Red Bullet Bar alone."

"I must go with you," declared Mrs. Quain.

"Why so? I'm sure I can find my way back here."

"It isn't that," faltered the woman, "but those dreadful men. They will find and kill me!"

"The chances are against it."

"You don't know all. Rose, that man who was called 'Sam' was no stranger to me; he was my husband, Thomas Quain!"

The meek little woman uttered these words in a quavering voice, and Rose saw that she was as helpless as an infant.

"Impossible!" she exclaimed, in real want of faith.

"I tell you it was he. I've not seen him for

near twenty years, but I can't forget. It was his voice and his form; it was Thomas Quain."

"The man who can tell Allen the truth about the Sinclair tragedy?"

"Yes."

"He must be captured!"

Mrs. Quain looked at her friend in renewed alarm.

"Captured?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"By us."

If the younger lady had declared that they must enter a jaguar's den and each bear away a full-grown and untamed beast under the arms, Mrs. Quain would not have been more utterly thunderstruck. In the old days the voice of her husband had the power to drive every particle of color from her face and she used to watch his own in fear and trembling as a mariner watches his barometer for coming storms; now, to think of making war on her tyrant was too stupendous for consideration.

On the other hand Miss Jackson was all courage and resolution. She had followed Allen from St. Louis because she loved him, the roughs of the Catnip Trail had not dismayed her, and it would be a poor quality of devotion which would risk nothing for a loved one.

It was neither bravado nor cruelty which made her repeat her intention and assert that Mrs. Quain must go with her; together they must capture Tom.

They left the grove, bound on their hostile mission, though one would never have mistrusted to look at Mrs. Quain's shrinking figure that she was a warrior bold, and the search for the camp was begun.

It was a useless effort, for in the darkness and with nothing to guide them they knew not which way to go. Still, Rose was courageous, and it was only when her friend became utterly exhausted that she would think of halting.

Another grove was found and there they passed the rest of the night. Naturally, they fell asleep despite all danger.

When they awoke day had dawned, though the grayness showed that the sun was still some distance below the horizon.

Rose, arising, stood amazed. At the edge of the grove stood the regular stage with its horses attached, while both were making their breakfast on the shrubs and bushes. There was no sign of Eben Garland, but though the legs of the horses bore more than one bruise they seemed in very fair condition.

Something like the truth dawned on Rose's mind and she proceeded to capture the team. In this attempt she was successful, and then she felt like a Wellington after a Waterloo.

Mrs. Quain showed her exultation, but they were lamentably at fault on the points of the compass as applied to their situation. True, the sun would soon show them where the east lay, unless the world's machinery was out of order, but Red Bullet Bar might be due west, or northwest, or southwest—they didn't know which.

"But it don't matter," said Rose, bravely. "We'll push on and see what'll be the result."

Luckily, she had a better knowledge of horses and harnesses than Eben Garland, and the reins which he had arranged in such an original way were properly adjusted, and the stage rolled away due west, guided by the first beams of the sun, and with the fairest driver on the box that ever handled the ribbons on the Catnip Trail.

Both horses showed signs of lameness, but the matter was not serious.

A few hours before this a score of men, who were encamped on the track not far away, were pleased to see two persons walk into their midst. They were promptly seized and questioned, and gave the names of Gentle John and Ned Gray, but the latter, who had been using his eyes, spoke to the nearest man in a low voice.

"Isn't this Bullet Head's band?" he asked.

"What of it?" demanded the person addressed.

"Simply that I am the man who went out with him, and if you are what I think I may explain that things are mixed."

"But where is Tony's stage?"

"I'll be hanged if I know. Things have gone wrong and I'm afraid Eben Garland won't be your prisoner to-night. I also believe you are Allen, by name?"

"I am."

And here a few words of explanation are necessary. It will be remembered that Garland's letter to Bartlett, which fell into Allen's hands, contained exact information of the time and means of his arrival. Having learned this, Allen resolved to intercept and capture him, and see if a confession might be frightened out of him.

Bullet Head was in a pliable mood and he agreed to help. It was decided that his band should lie in ambush for the stage, while the Bravo and one other man were to be passengers and give their aid there. Both were disguised, and Bullet Head became Sam and his companion was Ned.

We have already recorded the events of the trial, and when Ned had explained as much to Allen the latter saw that Bullet Head's folly had ruined all unless they could regain the scattered threads.

Neither Ned nor Gentle John could tell where Tony's camp was to be found, for the simple reason that what went to make up the camp had disappeared, and they decided to settle down and wait until morning.

Allen felt restless and ill at ease. He had laid his plans to capture Garland and compel him to confess, and this hitch in proceedings made him fear the old lawyer would get into Red Bar first.

This restlessness caused him to leave the other men, who had flung themselves down to sleep, and wander away in the darkness. He went on aimlessly, finding a pleasure in the cool air, but betraying a recklessness which was due to his inexperience.

When he turned and tried to retrace his steps he failed to find the camp; he was lost as the others had been before him.

Morning, however, was well on the way and he gave himself no uneasiness. Finding a rough spot by the wayside he finally placed his back against a rock and tried to make himself comfortable.

He had not been there over five minutes when a peculiar sound arose on the air. We say "peculiar," and so it was for that vicinity, but when Allen had duly analyzed it, it proved to be no more or less than a *human snore*.

Clear, full and regular the blast arose on the air, but the music had less effect on Allen than the fact that other campers were near. He arose, crept forward and looked among the rocks.

By the dim light he saw two men lying side by side, but he had no means of knowing if they were acquaintances.

While he looked one of the two arose, rubbed his eyes and muttered something Allen did not catch. His face and form struck the young man as being familiar; unless he greatly erred, Bullet Head was before him.

The man arose and moved toward his sleeping companion. He bent over and seemed about to awaken him. Allen did not suspect that it was otherwise until he saw his right hand arise and saw the shape of a knife.

Realizing the truth, Allen bounded to his feet, resolved to avert the tragedy. He was too late. The knife descended with a dull, heavy thud, even as Allen found his voice.

"Hold, Bullet Head!" he cried, in horror.

The assassin bounded to his feet and faced him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE RETURN TO THE BAR.

For a moment there was silence between the two men. Allen was horrified at what he had seen and his companion was not wholly indifferent to the fact that he had been caught in a terrible and cowardly crime.

Then he started a little.

"Allen!" he muttered.

"Yes, Bullet Head, it is I," Allen gravely answered. "I have seen an unexpected sight."

The Bravo rubbed his eyes, confused by the stern and rebuking tone.

"The infernal liquor was in my brain," he muttered. "It wasn't my nature, anyhow, but he annoyed me a good bit. We lost Eben Garland through his folly, and we had a rough-and-tumble last night. Waking suddenly, now, the former anger was in my mind and I hit him before my head was clear."

Allen bent over the stricken man. It was the unfortunate Tony and he was stone dead. The Bravo's knife had gone home so surely that his victim had not even uttered a groan.

The world lost nothing by his death, but Allen shivered as he thought that he was associating with such a man. Bullet Head was as worthy of confidence as a jaguar.

Resolved to say nothing further about the crime, Allen turned abruptly away.

"Where are the women you captured last night?"

"How did you know about them?" demanded the Bravo, somewhat sheepishly.

"Ned told me."

"Well, they knew enough to clear out when Tony and I had our first fight. I haven't seen them since."

Allen had no desire to remain near the driver's body, so they went a little one side to await daylight. This was not a long task, for at the end of half an hour they discovered the band, and speedily rejoined it, Bullet Head once more taking command.

Daylight, too, was improved to look about for certain things they wanted to find. Half a mile to the east Gentle John's unique team was discovered and secured, but Tony's outfit, the ladies and Eben Garland were alike invisible.

"We must trail them," said Bullet Head, promptly, for he had resumed the kind of dignity he assumed when with the band, and was no longer the drunken boaster of the previous evening.

It was less easy to follow the trail of the women than that of the heavy stage and flying horses; but only a few yards had been crossed when from out a grove came the whole together—Tony's outfit at a gentle trot, with Miss Jackson on the box handling them like a professional, and Mrs. Quain by her side.

The sight of so many men would have alarmed them; but Gentle John promptly reined t' ward them, and they grew reassured; his outfit was not to be confused with that of any other stage line in Colorado.

Chance had caused Allen to take a seat beside John, and he soon startled that worthy man by a most emphatic exclamation, and then remained deaf to his request for an explanation; but as the teams halted near each other, Allen leaped from one vehicle to the other, and folded the handsomer lady of the two in his arms.

Gentle John opened his eyes still wider.

"I aim ter be right," he said to himself, "but I thinks as how I may softly assert that my youngest passenger hez got a defender!"

The reader will easily understand the situation and Allen's surprise. When he left St. Louis after Mr. Jackson had refused him Rose's hand, he little thought their next meeting would be in the wildest part of Colorado.

"He has a poopy c'rect eye fur beauty," added Gentle John; "but I didn't s'pose my passengers was friends of highway robbers an' sech. It looks ez though I was ther only honest man in ther gang, an' I begin ter feel a desire ter turn road-adjudant, though I usually aim ter be right."

"Puffectly fit an' proper!"

The words arose from near his elbow, and he suddenly wheeled. He was face to face with Wicked William. One moment Gentle John gazed, and then he leaped from the box, and caught the ragged man in his arms.

"Whoop-ee!" he yelled. "Set 'em up on tother alley."

"Puffectly fit an' proper," William again observed.

Old friends were they, having been over half the wide West together; but they had drifted apart a year before. Since then Gentle John had made a little money by running a bowling-alley at Comet Camp; but Wicked William had not met with any inheritance, and having a lofty scorn for labor, soap and such trifles, had nearly gone to seed.

This, however, did not prevent his old friend from welcoming him back with open arms.

There was a third unexpected meeting on the prairie, though only one party shared in the surprise.

Bullet Head, moving forward to speak to Allen, suddenly stopped as though shot. His gaze had rested upon the meek wife he had deserted years before, and the lapse of time had not destroyed the memory of her face.

She did not see him, but he stared blankly for several seconds before he recovered his usual composure. When he did he turned abruptly away, and after that, took care not to let her see his face.

The fact that he failed to recognize her the previous night was because in capturing the women, Rose had fallen to his lot and Tony had taken Mrs. Quain.

The party soon set their faces toward Red Bullet Bar and moved on. Some strategy was necessary to make an entrance there without creating suspicion, for it would hardly do for the road-agents to ride in as a guard for the stages.

It was finally agreed that Gentle John should take both in, aided by Rose, and then it would be easy to tell of an attack by robbers and the death of Tony.

So the party went on, Bullet Head riding well in advance to baffle the eyes of his wife; Allen occupying the driver's box with Rose; and with Gentle John and Wicked William on the second vehicle.

The latter pair were the happiest persons there, taking it all in all, for they were without cares and they were laying plans for a future together. Gentle John was about to move further west, but both he and Wicked William agreed that they wished to see this Red Bar drama through.

When near the village Bullet Head and his band prepared to leave. Of course Allen had to do the same, but he had said to Rose that he would disguise himself and soon be near her again. To go as he was would be to dare the wrath of the town, which must not be done.

Leave-takings were duly made and the two stages rolled into the village with Gentle John on the foremost and Rose handling the ribbons over Susan and Buttercup.

The Barites were already excited over the non-arrival of the stage, and its appearance under such circumstances completed their wonder. There was a general rush for Gentle John to know what had happened.

There had been a fear that his word would not be taken with Tony Wells lying dead out on the prairie, but the Barites took to him from the first, the women gave tone to his statement, and the mail and team were in safety.

So Gentle John was believed.

Rose and Mrs. Quain not only found themselves forgotten, but such a crowd blocked up the door of the hotel that they were unable to enter. While in this dilemma they were approached by a smooth-faced Chinaman who smiled in a gentle way.

"'Merican man sendee me," he explained. "You no gitee in theree; hotelee all fullee. Go

to house over there an' Johnee come pretty soone."

His meaning was clear and seemed plausible. The hotel, surrounded by its crowd of rough miners, was not an inviting looking place to these delicate St. Louis ladies, while the house to which the Chinaman pointed did look very comfortable and respectable.

Thinking they saw Gentle John's kind forecast in this, the ladies promptly dismounted and told the "eathen" they were ready.

He led the way at once, and as only a little over a hundred yards intervened they were soon at the house. The guide led the way inside where they were met by a hands me young woman who greeted them cordially and said a good many encouraging things.

According to her statement, one of the richest men of the town, and her father, had become interested in them after hearing Gentle John's story, and Red Bar was ready to show that it was not an inhospitable place.

All this sounded very pretty and Rose and Mrs. Quain were delighted with the frankness of Western manners.

The young woman had said that she would serve them a breakfast and it was soon brought in by a second Chinaman; a tempting-looking repast to which they did not fail to do full justice.

Perhaps they did more.

When the meal was finished the young woman suggested that perhaps they would like to lie down for a while, after their journey, and as they did feel tired and sleepy, this offer was also accepted.

Twenty minutes later both were asleep.

When the young woman left them she went directly to another room, and, her knock having been answered, she entered and was in the presence of Edmund Bartlett and Eben Garland.

Yes, the old lawyer, whom we left making a somersault in the air when the stage-wheel struck a boulder, was there and plainly in good condition. He had reached the Bar ahead of the stage.

When he left his seat on the stage-box so unceremoniously he struck on the ground with such force as to stun him. When he recovered consciousness two rough, but honest, travelers were working over him, and it was through their aid that he went on to his destination.

Once there, it was easy to find Bartlett.

"Well, Hester?" said the latter, inquiringly, as the young woman entered.

"All goes well," was the calm reply. "They have taken their coffee and retired, and if your Chinaman knows his business, the battle is won."

"Have no fear," said Bartlett, confidently. "Ki Lee knows his business. Didn't he decoy them in nicely? That is his way of doing business and he can be depended upon at any moment. His drug will make these women sleep soundly for twelve hours; I'm sure of it."

"But are you sure it won't injure them?" demanded Eben Garland. "As badly as Mrs. Quain has behaved, she is still my sister and I would not see her injured."

"Never fear for that, but give your wits to helping me decide what we shall do with her and the girl. They are on our hands—how shall we dispose of them?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE VAULT OF DEATH!

THE reader will naturally perceive how Rose and Mrs. Quain were trapped, but an explanation is necessary to show the quickness of Bartlett's wits. They saw the stages drive up to the hotel and Garland recognized his sister. It took him but a moment to surmise that she had come on to Red Bar to aid Allen, and as her testimony was most dangerous to the course he upheld he became frightened.

As soon as Bartlett had been told the trouble he seized on the points of the case, and the remedy, and executed the plan we have seen operated.

Rose and Mrs. Quain were prisoners, and unless suspicion was directed to Bartlett's house it might be a long while before they would be of use to Allen.

"Isn't there some place where they can be confined?" asked Garland. "You spoke in a former letter—"

Bartlett interrupted him hurriedly.

"Yes, I know; you refer to Austin's old house, but that has been burned since then."

He had done his best to avert suspicion, but Hester Ware was not deceived. She knew there was a secret den about the place; she suspected the house was full of them like the castles of the Middle Ages, with numerous traps and panels; but she yielded meekly when Bartlett dismissed her on a plausible errand.

The mine-owner then drew Garland well to one side.

"Yes; I mentioned my iron vault in a letter to you," he said, in a subdued voice. "It is the greatest place made since the Tower of Babel. It keeps what it gets; being made of solid stone, cement and iron, it defies everything. I had it prepared for Robert Sinclair. As I wrote you,

he took a fancy to return to this country and I thought the next step in his sudden bravery would be to go to St. Louis, declare his innocence and demand a trial. That would hardly be safe, you know, and I resolved to avoid the danger and at the same time stop the drain on my purse."

"You should have done so years ago," the lawyer said.

"I realize it, now. Well, I had the vault made and lured him to Red Bullet Bar, after which I seized and confined him in the place."

"How does he like it?"

"Very well, so far as I know," said the arch-plotter, caressing his chin and smiling blandly. "At present, his spirit must be in the hereafter. Once my captive, I left him alone."

"To starve?"

"Yes."

Garland shivered. Bad as he was, he would not allot such a fate to any one.

"Some day this vault will do you mischief, I fear," he said. "What of the mason who built it?"

"He shared the joys and sorrows of Robert Sinclair. They starved together."

"Good heavens!" the lawyer exclaimed.

"Why should I scruple?" demanded his companion, fiercely. "If there is a judgment, my condition was fixed years ago. A few additional crimes can't change the matter. If there isn't a future life, I'm safe anyhow."

"True, true," added Garland; "that is logic. You are right to look out for your own interests and now, of course, you are tolerably secure."

"You would think so if you knew what a tumult has been made around my ears of late. About every half-hour some one drops in and says, sort of parenthetically, 'You killed Reginald Sinclair, didn't you, or if you didn't, who did?' It's the old tale of Cock Robin over again in a revised form. I feel anything but secure."

Bartlett then gave an outline of what had occurred and the lawyer agreed that matters were far from being satisfactory.

In the mean while there was less excitement outside over the disappearance of Rose and Mrs. Quain than had been expected. If Gentle John had been confined in more fully it would have been far better, but as he had not been told that danger might come to them, he decided, after once sure they were gone, that they had deliberately given him the slip.

"I aim to be right," he observed to the landlord, as he gracefully tossed down a glass of yellowish liquid, "an' I never intrude whar I ain't wanted. When ther pins are all down I set 'em up on t'other alley. Now, as business ain't drivin' hyar, I think I'll start fur Nevada ter-morrer. I've got a pard over thar, a Chinee whose name is Bad Lung, an' him an' me'll amble on torts ther Accident!"

"Ther Accident?"

"Anóther name fur ther West. I sometimes raise my warble in meeterfors."

"Better wait a day or two. I'm goin' ter hev in some prime Bourbon, an' you ought to carry some for medicinal use."

"I yield to your superior wisdom; I'll stay. Hyar's ther pay fur a week's lodgin', at ther send o' which time you kin cross my name off ther register and write down 'longside on': 'Gone ter meet Bad Lung!'"

From which it will be seen Gentle John was not worrying much about the ladies he had brought through to the Bar, and Bartlett's scheme was a complete success.

The day passed quietly. Neither Bartlett nor Garland ventured outside the house, but they made arrangements for the future. One of the Chinamen was sent out to secure quarters for Rose and Mrs. Quain, who remained under the power of the drug, where they would be held securely but well-used.

They were to be removed during the night.

Ever since Eben Garland heard of the death-vault, he had a morbid desire to see the place. He shivered when he thought of Robert Sinclair dying in there of starvation, but that only increased his desire, which was of that kind which some one has called "the attraction of repulsion."

Just as the clock struck ten he stated his desire to Bartlett. Oddly enough, the latter did not object; he felt proud of his little invention, and anxious to exhibit it, while the presence of what was inside would not affect him, he believed.

Consequently they took a lantern and went to the store-room, carefully closing the door after them to baffle Hester Ware's prying eyes.

Bartlett went methodically about his work, turned the combination lock and raised the cover of the vault.

"Bah! what a smell of oil!" said Garland.

"It's less strong than it was, but, for that matter, it isn't all oil. Never mind; look down like this!"

The mine-owner had skillfully adjusted the lantern to the pole as we have seen him do on a former occasion, and he then knelt down, lowered the light and scanned the interior.

The painted walls gleamed whitely, making a sort of uncanny light, but his gaze at once wandered to where he had lately seen the two dark heaps. They were still there, and with a

slight wavering of his strong nerves he withdrew his gaze.

"You may look—" he began, addressing Garland, but the sentence was never finished.

Strong hands suddenly seized the arch-plotter, and as he twisted vainly, thinking Eben was playing a practical joke upon him, he was pitched headlong down the opening—down into the vault of death!

The old lawyer had just one glimpse of a dark form as his companion was flung down; then the cover clanged down in place, the man wheeled and he and Eben stood face to face.

In the dim light the latter could only tell that a stout, broad-shouldered man stood before him, but there was a lawlessness about his bearing which terrified him.

He stood in shivering silence, his mind anxious for flight, but his feet seeming to be glued to the floor.

"Hello, Eb, old boy!" exclaimed his companion. "How are you? Ain't you glad to see me?"

Conscious only that Bartlett had been hurled into the death-vault, and expecting to meet as severe a fate himself, the lawyer half-unconsciously faltered:

"I don't know you."

The man laughed mockingly.

"What's the matter with your eyes? You ought to know me, for we are old friends. My name is Tom Quain, at your service!"

Bullet Head was indeed on the scene.

The information was not very encouraging to Garland, but he caught at the one straw.

"Why, Thomas, I'm pleased to see you. I am, really—"

"Why of course you are," sneered Quain. "Why shouldn't you be? We are brothers-in-law and old companions in crime. Who ever thought, in the old days, that Robert Sinclair would end his career by dying in such a hole as that under us? Well, fate's a queer thing and he sleeps down there. I've sent Bartlett to keep him company. Do you suppose he will enjoy it?"

"I don't know," said Eben, shivering.

"He ought to, I'm sure, for the place is one of his own making. It took me a long time to find out all about it. You see I met Sinclair when he first came to Red Bullet Bar and took an interest in his case. He disappeared. I searched far and near, but not a trace could I find. I felt sure Bartlett had made way with him, but this vault was an idea of which I had never heard."

"I don't think Bartlett intended they should starve," said Garland, apologetically.

"Who said he did starve? Not I; and it seems you are fully Bartlett's confidant if not in the plot. It was a diabolical plot! Why, I would not throw a mad dog in there and give him such a death!"

His voice rang out angrily and his flashing eyes still further alarmed his companion.

"Don't blame me, Thomas; I was in St. Louis, at the time."

"True, but like a vulture hastening to a carcass, you were attracted to Red Bar by the scent of blood. Oh! you are a pretty pair; I know you of old and a rich living I'd had out of you all these years had I not been doing better elsewhere. Bartlett, however, has trod on my toes and he must take the consequences. I've put him into his death-trap, and there, where lies all that is mortal of Robert Sinclair and Albert Leverett, he can remain for the time. Or will you summon his John Chinamen to open the vault?"

"No, no!" Eben hastily declared.

"I don't believe you; I can see falsehood branded on your face. You shall go with me, Eben, and I'll find you a secure place. Ha! d'ye hear that?"

A muffled sound arose from the vault.

"Bartlett is trying his lungs. Let him howl; nobody will hear him unless they're in this room. As for you, old man, you may go with me."

"But, Thomas—"

"Go with me or into the vault. Take your choice!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

A TRIO OF KNIGHTS-ERRANT.

LIEUTENANT DARKE had not taken the risk which he ran in baffling Bullet Head without a good deal of fear and trembling. There was a chance that his schemes would not succeed and he knew that if he failed he was a lost man.

Bullet Head never forgave a treason.

It was the knowledge of this fact which impelled Darke to make the attempt. Had he been sure the Bravo would receive him back into the band and forget bygones, he would have abandoned Lila and gone; but he had a strong suspicion that when he had once surrendered her he would also have to surrender himself.

Such being the case, he resolved to risk all on the cost of the die.

We have seen how he risked and won. He lost no time after leaving Bullet Head outside the cabin, but passing out at the rear as the Bravo afterward discovered, hastened to the cabin where Lila was really confined.

It was the work of a comparatively short time to lead out his horse, place Lila in the saddle, mount and gallop away. His face was toward the north and he did not intend to pause until a goodly dis-

tance had been placed between him and the outlaw's resort.

Lila made no resistance; she had tested her powers before and did not care to repeat the attempt, but had she known at first how near the Bravo was one cry would have materially changed her future.

Darke gave his horse no rest that night, but, doubly burdened as he was, urged him on until the stars paled and day was at hand. Then he made for a new cover, for he had decided not to travel by day.

Time would be lost by halting; but all along the road were men in sympathy with Bullet Head, and who made daily reports, chiefly to put the Bravo on the trail of plunder, and they would be sure to tell him of the runaways.

Another night of travel followed; but Darke resolved to rest no more on the second day than was necessary to keep his horse in condition.

He was moving along a prairie which was skirted at the west by hills, and there seemed little fear of meeting any one there.

Luckily, he shot an antelope, and on this they made a breakfast.

Lila, who had given up all hope, was silent and melancholy. Darke had used her with a considerable degree of kindness, but she did not forget that she was a prisoner. Twice had she refused his hand before her capture, and this last indignity was not calculated to change her views.

The lieutenant, on his own part, sat gazing steadily into the embers of the fire he had kindled, and with a thoughtful look, puffed irregularly at his pipe.

Whatever his thoughts, he suddenly aroused at last.

"Lila," he said, "I want to ask you once more to look on me as a little better than a brute. I may not be perfect, but do I deserve such disdain as you use toward me? Wherein have I sinned?"

His air of injured innocence would have been amusing under less serious circumstances.

"I once heard you say that horse-stealing should be punished by death," Lila replied; "what, then, of woman-stealing?"

"The case is different, for I love you—"

"The horse-thief loves the prize he secures."

"You are relentless."

"I am just."

"Is love, then, a crime?"

"I believe it is in the majority of cases. At least, if you claim to be actuated by it, we cannot call it less than that."

"Lila, you will drive me mad!"

"I believe you are that already."

An angry reply trembled on his lips, but he repressed it, and abruptly arose.

"We will go on," he said, gloomily.

They resumed their journey, but Darke was in a less cheerful mood than usual. He began to realize that the mere possession of Lila was but a slight gain; it would be hard to make one of her brave nature settle down and tamely accept life with him.

He began to wonder if he would not do better to abandon her. He had a few streaks of honor in his wild nature; and at that moment, if he could have done so, he would probably have restored her to her friends.

But who were her friends? Her father had proved himself an enemy, and Darke could not answer for the rest of the family.

As they went on the lieutenant did not fail to keep a sharp watch all around, for he valued his life as much as any man, and he finally observed three horsemen in his rear. They were following exactly his own trail, and moving faster than he, and conscious guilt made him regard them with suspicion.

Resolved to part company from them on the trail, he made a series of deviations and soon had the satisfaction of seeing them disappear from his view.

"Ha! here are the remains of a camp-fire and the coals are still bright. He has not been gone two hours."

"I aim ter be right, but I should unequivocally say he has b'en gone less."

"Let us push on at once then."

"Puffectly fit an' proper, an' ef you'll allow me ter take ther trail I'll soon show him to yer."

"Perhaps he hez the best hoss."

"His'n is double-loaded an' we kin easily run et down."

"I yield to your s'perior wisdom."

"Come right on an' ther red slayer shall have a chance ter slay."

The speakers were three men who had halted where Darke had his morning fire. All are known to us; they were Wicked William, Gentle John and Ned, the sometime companion of Bullet Head in the coach adventure.

The trio looked about as before except that William's complexion seemed less dark than usual. This was due to the combined influence of Gentle John and an application of full-proof water.

The delay of the trio was but brief, for two at least of their number could read signs well and they pushed on briskly in the way Darke had gone. They caught sight of the fugitive before they were seen in turn, and quickening their pace, rapidly decreased the distance between them.

"I aim ter be right," said Gentle John, anon, "but I reckon ther reptyle ahead has seen us. He's dodgin' about in flea-fashion, an' tryin' ter throw us off ther trail."

"Puffectly fit an' proper ef he kin do it," William serenely answered, "but ef you'll foller my lead I'll surprise ther varmint poooty soon. We're gwinne ter hay ther gal back."

"Sartin we be, an' ef her captor objects we'll bowl him off ther alley."

They were not men to be thwarted easily, and had Darke known who was on the track he would have given spur to his horse and rode at full speed. The disappearance of the trio deceived him, however, and he began to pick his way in a leisurely fashion again.

He was traveling a country new to him, and though he had chosen it intentionally to avoid notice, considerable attention was necessary to advance safely.

The way grew rougher and what prairie he saw was in small fields and of little account. The hills began to show on his right, as well as at the left,

and he saw that he was nearing a wild place where it seemed easy to find hiding-places for an army.

This was all the more welcome because, looking back again, he saw the trio of horsemen coming after him, and there was room for renewed fear that they were following his trail.

He quickened the pace of his horse and went on briskly. Before him was a heavily wooded country, while on his right a sheer cliff extended to meet it.

Before the wood was reached the unknown trio emerged from cover at the rear, but Darke began to feel at ease. The wood seemed to put out its branches like friendly arms.

He reached the shelter and pushed on as before. The cliff was close to him at the right and a hundred feet high, while on the left was a wooded bluff. Thus, he was riding through a beautiful, walled-in valley.

Suddenly, however, he checked his horse and the beauty of the scene vanished. The cliff came around in front of him with a bold sweep and, meeting the bluff at the left, barred his progress in that direction.

One moment he looked and then a savage exclamation fell from his lips. No man could ascend that cliff, much less a horse.

He turned toward the bluff, now his last hope. He found it steep and unpromising, but he was not to be stopped. He caught a glimpse of another horseman among the trees and recognized one of his supposed pursuers.

Resolved to take the one chance open to him he led his horse into a thicket and secured him to a bush.

He then turned to Lila.

"We must go up this bluff; it is our sole hope. We are pursued by men who I suspect will show no mercy to either of us. I hope you are sensible enough to do your best to escape them."

"I will; lead on."

The ascent was begun, but even Darke had underrated its difficulty. Had it not been for the numerous bushes they could not have made any progress at all, but from them they received valuable aid.

Lila kept her promise and did her best, and they toiled laboriously toward the summit. Darke saw that point grow near with renewed hope. He had expected to hear a shout from below, but none came and the ascent was almost completed.

Finally, Darke raised his hand to draw himself to the top and then—

He suddenly found himself seized in a firm grasp, lifted from his feet and pitched headlong down the bluff. He went like a projectile of war, and there was a most tremendous uproar as he went crashing through the bushes.

At almost the same moment a big, brown hand closed around Lila's arm.

"I aim ter be right," said a voice, "but I won't venture ter lift you higher till you say so."

The girl found herself looking into a very homely, but honest-looking face.

"Who are you?" she demanded, her fears struggling with her inclination to trust him.

"Gentle John is my name, an' though I'm opposed ter warblin' my own praises, gentle is my nature. Shall we go up?"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

FOOLISH JOE AS A GUIDE.

GENTLE JOHN, with all his uncouthness, was far from being a repulsive man, and Lila felt that she could trust him. She held out her hand and was helped to level ground.

"I bowed your late lamented off ther alley kind o' unceremonious," added John. "I hope you don't keer fur that item."

"Not if you are really my friend."

"I am that, an' I've come all ther way from Red Bar ter do it. I'm a stranger ther, bein' late from Comet Camp, but I found ther squarest man in ther West at ther Bar when I arrove. That same is Wicked William, an' twas him that roped me in fur this trip. I aim ter be right, an' when William said ther game was straight, I tuk a hand, I reckon they're all down but nine."

Lila did not clearly understand all he said, nor did the name of Wicked William have a very cheering sound, but she placed her trust in her rescuer; and when he suggested that they descend the bluff she readily agreed.

He found a place less steep than the one by which she had ascended and they were soon in the *cul-de-sac*.

There they found Gentle John's allies bending over Darke. The woman-stealer had fared badly in his unceremonious descent. No bones were broken, but his clothing was fully as ragged as that of Wicked William, and his face was a good deal bruised.

He lay moaning on the ground, but there was more show than reality in his groans; he hoped for a chance to escape.

"You two hev come jest in time," said William, bowing deeply to Lila. "Ther red slayer has been a-slayin', as you kin perceive, an' we must perceed to ther cheerful duty o' an inquisition. A coroner must be 'lected ter set on this durnation critter an' decide whether he is guilty or not guilty."

"I nominate you for coroner," said John.

"Puffectly fit an' proper, but judgin' by ther looks o' ther deceased, he is so eternally scratched ter pieces that settin' is dang'rous. I'll stan' up an' hear ye, arter which I must prologue ye."

"I aim ter be right," said Gentle John, "an' I move ther gal goes round 'mongst us an' gits our votes."

No one objected, and the full vote was soon taken. It resulted as follows:

Ned: "Guilty, and deserving of death!"

Wicked William: "Guilty, with extensive circumstances."

Gentle John: "Guilty, with malice o' thought."

So far the jury had agreed, but on the next point there was a serious division. Ned favored hanging him, the other two men thought an application of twenty lashes on the bare back would serve to quicken his moral ideas, but Lila voted to let him go entirely.

Oddly enough, her single voice carried the day in the end; Darke was told that he might go provided he went quickly.

"But don't ye never be seen ag'in whar ther

flowers o' innercence bloom in ther medder," continued Wicked William. "I've sat on yer marsfully, but ther next time ther'll be a dead nigger in ther watermelon-patch when I git arter ye. I'm rank pizen ef ye take me in big doses. Go, an' look out fur ther red slayer!"

But Darke went straight to Lila.

"I owe all this to you," he said, humbly. "You have paid me good for evil when I'm not deserving. I wish it was in my power to show you I appreciate it, but it can't be. Let me say, though, that you'll have no more trouble from me. My face is toward Montana, and when I get there I may remember what my old mother taught me, illustrated as it has been by you. Good-by!"

He mounted his horse and rode away, never again to be seen by them. They watched him out of sight and then turned their own faces toward Red Bullet Bar.

Eben Garland did not by any means defy Tom Quain. He felt about as cheerful in the latter's company as he would in that of a tiger, and when Quain bore hard on the screws he lost all ideas and theories of his own and declared himself ready to oblige his amiable brother-in-law in all ways.

Quain was not so sure of his own course. Chance had enabled him to shut Bartlett up in the vault, and he wished him to remain there in the company of the dead until he had received a specimen of his own conduct.

If Garland was left at liberty, this purpose would, of course, be defeated.

Such being the case he informed the lawyer that he must follow him. He only remained to fasten the cover to the death-vault, and he did this so well that only himself could open it, using a new artifice on the combination, and then he left the house accompanied by Garland.

As luck would have it, his coming and going were not observed, and as will be seen no one had observed Garland and Bartlett when they went to the store-room.

Ki Lee, who had made all arrangements for the removal of Rose Jackson and Mrs. Quain to their new prison, waited in vain for his master to appear and give him orders to start. He knew it was time such a move was made, for the drug he had mixed for the women was rapidly losing its power and they would soon be able to make trouble.

The Chinaman roamed over the house again and again in his search, but though all the rest of the household was enlisted, no trace of Bartlett was found.

True, Ki Lee, who had taken it on himself to look into the store-room, heard a muffled voice arising from the iron vault, but he only shivered and muttered:

"What! dey alibe still? 'Melican manee have nine lives like catee!"

As time passed on the Celestial drug-dealer often visited Rose and her friend and he plainly saw that something must be done or they would soon be conscious and all would be lost.

He resolved to take the responsibility of administering another drug to keep them as they were.

He went to his room and soon returned secretly bearing a vial. He entered the room where they lay on the bed moving with a cat-like step. They seemed like people in an ordinary sleep except that their breathing was heavier and their faces pale.

Ki Lee held his vial in his right hand, and leaning forward, raised Rose's head. He advanced the drug, and it was about to pass her lips when a hand closed over his wrist.

"Wait!" said a voice.

The Chinaman turned quickly and saw Foolish Joe. The latter, however, no longer acted the idiot cripple. He stood erect, spoke intelligibly, and looked the same.

Ki Lee was not surprised, but his almond-shaped eyes twinkled angrily.

"What you wantee?" he demanded.

"I want that," Joe replied, as he snatched away the vial.

"You gib dat backee! How dare you touchee? You gib it backee, all lightee; no gib backee, tell him."

Ki Lee made a gesture supposed to indicate Bartlett, but the threatened quarrel was averted by a startling discovery. A sound from the bed caused both to look that way, and they stood in consternation as they saw Rose looking at them steadily.

"Gib dat backee!" cried Ki Lee, in a shrill tone, as he reached out his hand for the vial, but the scene suddenly assumed a new aspect.

Rose's hand suddenly emerged from cover, and the dark muzzle of a revolver was turned upon the men.

"I'll take charge here, myself," she coolly said. "I am not to be poisoned like a cat or dog, and if there is any killing to be done I'm the person to do it!"

It was a bloodthirsty speech, but she had already learned the necessity of talking to the Far West Romans in a language they could understand.

Ki Lee shrunk back like a poodle after a cold-water bath, but Foolish Joe faced the revolver without a tremor.

"I guess you're wide awake enough to know I'm not here as an enemy. I interfered to keep this rater from poisoning you, and now I'm willing to prove my good-will by taking you to a safer place than this."

"I want to go to a hotel," said Rose, sitting upright, and speaking in a business-like manner.

"All right; I'll wring the neck of this varmint and you can slide out of the window."

Joe scowled at Ki Lee, who promptly drew a small knife, but his more powerful companion disarmed him easily, and flinging the weapon from the window,

Whether Foolish Joe could be trusted she did not know, but as the hour was late she resolved to try the experiment.

Joe urged an instant departure and little time was lost. The descent to the ground was an easy one and the two ladies soon stood on firm soil. Joe followed, still bearing Ki Lee.

At that time the Bar was very nearly quiet. Two saloons were yet in play and now and then an over-ardent patron was going home by a winding way, but there seemed little danger of meeting any one.

"Where's the hotel?" asked Rose, who had not forgotten that it was visible from Bartlett's house.

"Around on the other side; we are at the rear," Joe answered. "Come with me, it's only a few steps."

A muffled sound issued from Ki Lee's throat, but his powerful captor suppressed whatever he would have said by an additionally severe grasp which nearly put Ki Lee where poisoners and good rat-eaters go.

Rose took fresh courage and followed their guide around the house. She regretted that the darkness prevented her from distinguishing the outlines of the hotel, but as it was so near she would soon know if Foolish Joe was playing her false.

The latter went on with long steps which would have surprised those who had believed him a cripple, but the hotel did not become visible as it should have done.

Rose had not allowed herself to fall into carelessness, and as her guide still went on she suddenly paused.

"I won't go a step further!" she declared. "Show me the hotel or we part company here!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BULLET HEAD PLANS A GREAT SLAUGHTER.

FOOLISH JOE paused abruptly as Rose had done, but he did not release his hold on Ki Lee. Instead, he uttered a soft little whistle and men arose all around the two women.

Rose had not been unprepared for treachery. She had found out that human nature—or, at least, the kind they had in Red Bullet Bar—was not to be trusted, and she had carried her revolver in her hand, though somewhat concealed from view.

Consequently, when a brawny fellow made an attempt to seize her in his arms, she calmly pulled the trigger and down went her victim. Really, it did no good, for in a moment more the whole party were enveloped.

A fierce exclamation followed the shot, and the same voice added:

"Away with you, one and all. Git for the hills!"

Mrs. Quain uttered a gasp.

"Thomas!" she exclaimed, and then the man who held her found a dead weight in his arms.

After that a disinterested observer would have been filled with admiration to see the celerity with which the party got out of the village. There was a rush, a mounting of horses, a dash and a cloud of dust—and the intruders were gone.

And when such of the villagers as had been aroused by the shot came out to see what was wrong, they found a small, dilapidated-looking Chinaman as the sole relic of the affair. This man, sitting up feebly and caressing his discolored neck, mournfully murmured between his groans:

"'Merican man pinch like blaze; Chinaman feel like boil ricee. Him breathe, but dead all samee!"

This melancholy Celestial was Ki Lee.

In the mean time the wild band had swept away with Rose and Mrs. Quain in their midst. The latter was in a swoon and Rose had been disarmed, so it was a comparatively easy work.

They soon struck the base of the mountain and, winding up the steep side, entered a cave; Bullet Head was at home.

Mrs. Quain's ears had not deceived her; it was her husband who had captured them. Not once, however, did he speak going up the mountain. With his head low on his breast he was meditating and forming plans for the future.

Once in the cave he proceeded to eat a hearty supper and array himself in his best clothing. Since so many of his band had seen his face he had abandoned the mask, and his round head and prize-fighter-like face were well-known to his men.

His activity during the last few days had increased the admiration of his men and they were ready to applaud him to the echo.

On this occasion, having put himself in good condition, he sought his long-forsaken wife. She had been separated from Rose, but had recovered from her swoon.

When Bullet Head entered her cell it seemed as though every particle of blood receded from her face; it became utterly colorless. She knew his brutality and mercilessness and expected no better than death at his hands.

He paused, folded his arms and then laughed aloud at sight of her alarm.

"You don't seem glad to see me, Mrs. Quain?" he mockingly said.

"I—I—"

The unfortunate woman tried to assert her pleasure, fictitious though it was, as a drowning man clutches at a straw, but her words died away in her throat.

"You can't even inquire what kept me so long, can you? Upon my word, you are a cool one. If I was in your place I should be rejoiced to find my husband alive after so many years."

A sudden, unnatural spark of courage came to her.

"Why should I be glad?" she demanded. "Why should I care for the man who deserted me nearly twenty years ago and, leaving, never sent me one word to know if he lived?"

Her courage actually pleased the Bravo.

"There's sense in what you say, old lady, by Jupiter! and we won't quarrel over that. But, let me inquire why you told the boy I saw fit to have reared as my son that he was not my son? Why did you betray everything to Allen?"

Once more his fierceness set her to shivering like a wind-swept leaf.

"I—I pitied him," she faltered. "Pitied your grandfather!" brutally exclaimed the ruffian. "Didn't I caution you, when I brought that young shaver in, never to lisp the truth to any human being? If your memory is of half-length you may remember that I swore if you ever told I would kill you."

"But I thought you was dead. Oh! don't blame me, Thomas; I intended no harm. I was foolish, but—"

"Of course you were foolish. I never saw a woman that wasn't; it's born in 'em and it lasts till they go off the stage. Now, there isn't any foolishness in me and I'll prove it. Twenty years ago I said if you betrayed me on that child affair I'd kill you. I'm going to keep my word!"

With a shriek the poor woman flung herself at the feet of her tyrant, imploring pardon and mercy. The scene which followed was one we do not care to record in full. She might as well have appealed to a rock; Bullet Head had taken his stand and he was hard-hearted enough to keep it, though half the world knelt to him and implored him to have pity.

He left his wife once more in a swoon and went to his room where he indulged freely in fiery liquor. He believed he had matters at last where he wanted them.

When he confined Bartlett in the vault of death it was but an impromptu way of carrying out a carefully laid plan. He meant to confine him somewhere, and it certainly seemed as though the vault would hold him secure.

He, alone, could get him out when he saw fit, and when he did this he meant to have certain other people forever out of the way and make twenty thousand dollars the price of Bartlett's liberty.

Once in possession of this sum, Mr. Quain could place it with what he already had, go to Europe and there shine like a star of considerable brilliancy.

The unfortunate people whom we have said he meant to get out of the way were Allen, Blenker and Mrs. Quain. The two former had succeeded in getting altogether too many points of the Bartlett-Sinclair case, and though he was at present sheltering them and acting the part of a friend, he meant to look after his own interests rather than theirs.

He only waited for daylight to "put them out of the way," as he expressed it.

Daylight came at last and the Bravo gave certain orders to his men. As a result of one of these orders, Allen was soon conducted to his presence, though as he had merely been requested to present himself he did not suspect that trouble was brewing.

"I've concluded to give you a little light on your case, young man," the Bravo abruptly said. "I'll confess that much which you've found out is true. I'm Tom Quain, but I'm not your father. I brought you to my house, twenty years ago, just as that gossiping old woman, my wife, told you."

"I hope you don't blame her," said Allen, earnestly.

"You shall see later."

"Well, if I am the child you brought there, from where did you get me?"

"From the house of Robert Sinclair."

"You did?"

"Yes."

"You tell me this in good faith?"

"Oh! yes, I don't care a picayune to lie; it wouldn't do me any good. Robert was married, and Bartlett, who was bound to inherit the Sinclair money, knew it very well. The forgery charged against Robert was really the work of his kinsman who only waited to sweep the board clean when he had a chance. The chance came when old Reginald Sinclair went there to sleep over night. You know what followed."

Allen was full of half-suppressed excitement at this tardy revelation—too much so to suspect that a sting lay behind the Bravo's sudden friendliness.

"And who," he demanded, "struck the fatal blow?"

"Edmund Bartlett."

"And Robert Sinclair was innocent?"

"Yes!"

Words of joy fell from the young man's lips, but the Bravo continued:

"What good did it do him? He died, a few days ago, in Red Bullet Bar. Bartlett had a death-vault made under his house, Sinclair was entrapped and confined there, and there he died. His skeleton is all that remains of him."

His indifference was unnoticed by Allen whose indignation turned in another direction.

"I shall now have Bartlett arrested at once. We have sent for a second time to Denver for a detective, and when he arrives Bartlett goes back to St. Louis."

"Perhaps, but you will not live to see the day."

"I shall not!"

"No. To be frank with you, my dear foster-son, I have resolved to be the chief gainer in this affair myself. I'm going to feed you to the fishes!"

As the Bravo made this statement he also made a motion to his men who promptly seized upon Allen, holding him so that all resistance was useless.

The young man at once perceived that he had put confidence in Bullet Head only to see it betrayed; that most remarkable robber who oscillated between friendship and bitter enmity had taken another new departure.

Allen had an eloquent remonstrance on his lips, but before it could be made his hands were bound behind him and Bullet Head abruptly arose.

"Follow me!" he tersely said to his men.

They went out of the cave and the Bravo smiled grimly as he saw that the other persons he had doomed were being prepared for their end.

He led the way along a narrow gulch until a deep pool of water was reached. It filled a pocket in the rocks, and though made up entirely of mountain rains was twenty feet deep, nearly as wide and of an unmeasurable length as the rear end passed in among shelving rocks.

To one who looked downward, this water seemed as black as ink.

Bullet Head gave a few more orders and Allen's feet were bound. He began to see what was coming and made a struggle as desperate as it was vain.

A rock weighing a hundred pounds was then tied to his waist and all was ready for the last act.

"We're going to put you and a few others into this drink," the Bravo explained, "and unless you're proof against death you won't escape me this time. Men, toss him in!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CONFINED WITH SKELETONS.

ALLEN could see no hope with the new danger menacing him, and he silently bade farewell to the world. He did this with due solemnity, for death is not one of those jolly companions men are glad to meet, but he addressed the chief no further.

"Raise him up," said Bullet Head.

The order was obeyed.

"Throw him in!"

There was a splash, the dark waters of the pool opened to receive their victim, the body disappeared, and then all was as before except for the rippling of the yet agitated water.

"One gone to Davy Jones and here come the others," continued the Bravo.

Mrs. Quain and Blenker were led forward and Bullet Head gleefully made known their fate. The woman bewailed bitterly, but the ex-detective shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

They, too, were cast into the water, each securely bound and weighted down by a stone, and then, satisfied that he had triumphed, the Bravo led his men away.

He would have been a good deal surprised had he known that at that moment all three of his "victims" were sitting on dry land and in a condition far from serious. A friendly hand had been lifted in the hour of greatest need, and when Allen took the fatal plunge it was with his hands free from bonds and a knife in one of them.

This had been the work of one of the men who were apparently doing the chief's bidding, and it was so well conducted that no one except Allen and his friend knew what was being done.

Once in the water the young man retained his presence of mind. First of all he cut the weight clear, the strings around his ankles followed, and then he was free, the darkness of the water vailing all his movements.

When Blenker and Mrs. Quain followed he succeeded in rescuing both of them.

Then, in the shadow of the shelving rocks, an earnest consultation took place. It was clear to both Allen and Blenker that the hour of semi-earnest work was past; they must go into the battle anew and press matters to a decisive point. Bartlett, Bullet Head and Garland must be seized and delivered to the law.

Mrs. Quain and Allen were much concerned in regard to Rose, but Blenker opposed the idea of going back for her then. He knew he could find the entrance to the cave, and if they could not rely on the honest men of Red Bar to aid them they could at least form a party to kidnap Bullet Head.

Allen had taken quite a liking to Gentle John, and, wishing to have a talk with him, they descended the mountain and moved toward the town.

As luck would have it, they met that very individual on their way.

"I aim ter be right," said he, "but I must observe that this collusion seems very timely. D'ye know ye are all pardoned down thar in ther Bar? Ther gal, Lila, hes be'n founded, an' ther fickle populace is anxious ter receive you with open arms."

This was almost too good news to be true.

"How was the girl found?" Allen cautiously asked.

Gentle John then told of the trail he had followed in company with Ned and Wicked William. While they were talking the latter made his appearance, and testified as John had done. There could be no doubt but that there was a decided reaction in Red Bar, and that the people were anxious to make amends for their hasty work.

Bartlett was not to be found, and there were many who declared he had fled under dishonorable circumstances.

"I believe this is the hour for me to strike," said Allen, in a ringing voice. "If the people are with us, we need no longer go blindfolded. Let us work while the day is shining; let us go to the village, summon the people, and give the death-blow to Bullet Head and his gang. They have defied the law long enough."

"Puffectly fit an' proper," commented Wicked William.

And so they went to the town boldly, and were received far better than they dared hope. Sheriff Wood was especially effusive, and between him and Allen the crusade became active.

Red Bar was resolved to see Bullet Head under ground, and Allen was just as ready to help them, so it came about that, as a clear charge was required, the case of Tony Wells, the stage-driver, was taken as an example.

It will be remembered that Allen witnessed the death of the unfortunate man at the hands of the Bravo.

Accordingly, a formal warrant was served for the arrest of the chief, charging him with Tony's murder, and Allen swore to the facts before a legal officer.

Just at this time the twice-telegraphed-for Denver detective arrived, and the Red-Barites were so impressed that they consented to receive a charge against Bartlett.

As his enemies were only anxious to shut him up, for the time being, he was merely charged with assault and battery on Allen, and then Sheriff Wood went to the house to serve the warrant.

As all had expected, Bartlett was not to be found, but Wood grew angry at the failure, and spoke plainly.

"Madam," he said, addressing Hester Ware, "your uncle is concealed about the house, and you know where."

"Sir!" she exclaimed, angrily.

"You have heard me, madam, and I repeat it," the official added, with emphasis.

"I have once told you that I do not know," she said, with flashing eyes, "and it is not very gentlemanly for you to insist that I do. If I was a man you would not dare to talk thus; I'd pitch you out of the house."

"Then I'd have the law of you, madam," the sheriff exclaimed, his face becoming very red.

"The law! What do I care for that? I'd have you understand that I rise superior to the law. While it is represented by such a—a creature

"Yes, you do!" roared Wood, churning his prisoner up and down. "You're the old man's chief cook and bottle-washer; of course, you know. Now, show us the death-trap or I'll drive all your teeth out with your knees!"

The threat was certainly a sanguinary one, but it did not accomplish its object. Ki Lee swore by all his Chinese gods that he knew nothing about the vault, and in the end Wood had to go away unsuccesful.

"I'll get a posse and tear the old ranch down," he belligerently observed, to Allen. "I'll see the bottom of this affair or bu'st in trying."

His zeal made Allen smile, but the young man was glad the Denver detective was there to act as a weather-vane for the sheriff's eyes.

In the mean while, Ki Lee, additionally crushed by this new misfortune, was sitting disconsolately in a chair and bewailing his unhappy fate.

"Happy days all gonee; 'Melican men all 'busee. Tlink Ki Lee only dogee; choke him muchee, yellee to loud for any usee. What use livee? Bartlett him dead; good days all gonee. Me go killee an' be Chinaman with wings on sidee!"

We left Edmund Bartlett just after he was pitched into the death-vault by Bullet Head.

It was strange that he had no bones broken by the fall to the floor, but when he managed to recover the breath for the moment knocked out of him he found that he was uninjured, but the clang of the vault-cover filled him with a horror a broken limb would not have aroused.

Believing he owed this fall to Eben Garland, he yelled the latter's name again and again, imploring him to let him out. Brave, cold-blooded and practical as Bartlett had been, all his resolution vanished at sight of the company he had been relegated to and he was shivering like a leaf.

He looked to one side of the vault where two awful forms were visible. They were two human skeletons, one sitting with its back against the wall, the other lying near it.

They were ghostly companions, and the more so because Bartlett knew he was responsible for their death. Starvation had been their lot, and he it was that had doomed them.

Minutes passed on and there were no signs that he was to be taken out of his living tomb. Dead silence seemed above and about him except when he called. These calls, however, seemed to mock his efforts.

Thus, hours passed and his horror increased. At first he had hoped Garland had but played a joke on him, but the idea was growing stronger that the old lawyer had conceived some plan for grasping the Bartlett wealth and that he, the owner, was doomed to die in the vault as Robert Sinclair and Albert Leverett, the carpenter and mason, had died.

Some irresistible influence impelled the guilty man to go to the side of the skeletons and examine them. He had become so accustomed to the partial darkness that, by the aid of the white walls, he could see quite well.

It was not hard to distinguish the skeletons. The clothing, which had fallen to the cemented floor, told all that, and Leverett had been taller and larger than Sinclair.

We need scarcely say his examination was short. The fleshless skulls seemed to frown at him, and, horrified beyond expression, he crawled back to the other side of the vault and covered his face with his hands to shut out the sight.

Merciful Heaven! must he die as they had died?

Hours passed. Bartlett had called until he could call no longer, but though his voice would only rise to a husky whisper, he kept up the attempt, scarcely knowing whether he was whispering or speaking in tones of thunder. The mind of the guilty man wandered. Judgment had come to him swift, sure, and terrible. Already he seemed suffering the pangs of starvation. The skeletons, too, appeared to grin demoniacally and point their bony fingers at him in glee.

Additional skeletons seemed to appear, and, forming in groups, dance all around him.

His fancies were more than he could bear, and, with a shriek, the wretched man fell in a fit.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A THUNDERBOLT FOR ALLEN.

THERE was a heavy rumbling, a tearing, rending, and cracking, followed by a deep boom, and Bartlett's house was far from being the substantial affair of a moment before. The windows were broken in many pieces, timbers were started from their places, and at one side a yawning hole revealed the whole cellar to three men who were near at hand.

These men were taking a good deal of risk, one would say, for the time was yet short of twilight and he who had led them was Bullet Head. He wore a mask, but that seemed calculated to attract rather than quiet suspicion.

No calculation had been made for this last event, however.

"What was that?" demanded one of his followers, grasping his arm.

"An explosion, of course," the Bravo impatiently answered. "This winds up our game and we can do nothing to-night. The sooner we get out of the village the better."

"We can't go. See, the men are pouring toward here from all points; the explosion has drawn them."

Bullet Head surveyed the scene with a keen eye.

"Quick!" he exclaimed, "enter the cellar by this breach. We can pass through and escape by the other side. Follow me!"

He leaped into the cellar, and as the light was strong, at once perceived a mangled body at one side. It was that of Ki Lee, who had really committed suicide, and in his novel attempt had not only "blown himself up," but had nearly served the whole house in the same way.

The sight of his remains would have delayed them for but a moment, but, looking to the left, the Bravo saw another sight.

The explosion had torn away the northern and eastern walls of the cellar, and by the destruction of the latter a second cellar was revealed.

A second cellar?

Something about it caused the Bravo to turn from

his course and enter, followed by his men. The latter stood in wonder at finding themselves in an iron-bound den of a kind they could not name, but if the two skeletons visible by the uninjured wall were a criterion, it was a sepulchre.

"Look!" said Bullet Head, pointing to the skeletons. "This is what they keep in the vault of death!"

"Here's a live man," said one of his followers, suddenly. And then, from a corner, he dragged out a man who was certainly alive, though insensible.

"Edmund Bartlett!"

Bullet Head uttered the words in surprise, and a great desire to take the man away with him was still in his mind when the opening to this living tomb was suddenly darkened, as several other men appeared on the scene.

The road-agents were in a trap, and that they would have no benefit of the doubt was soon proved.

"Bullet Head!" cried one of the foremost men, and then there was a general excitement among them.

A reward had been offered for the capture of the Bravo, and here he was, right in their grasp.

The road-agents, knowing what capture meant, drew their weapons to fight to the last, and then the Red-Barites made their rush.

For full ten minutes a tremendous uproar sounded in the death-vault. Revolvers were fired and men shouted, but finally the crowd surged back; the fight was over, and Bullet Head, cut and bleeding, was a prisoner.

Inside the vault, however, lay several dead men, two of whom were the Bravo's late companions.

They had fought hard and done deadly work, but the force of numbers had overpowered them in the end.

Red Bar ran wild when it was known that the famous Bravo was captured. He had been their terror so long that it seemed a magnificent victory to turn the tables on him.

As usual, Judge Lynch came into sight; but Wood compromised the matter by declaring there should be an immediate trial, and that the hanging should take place at sunrise the next morning.

The trial was held in the jail, and was rather an informal affair. It had been decided to press but one point—the murder of Tony Wells, the stage-driver, and Allen was called upon to testify.

He had decided that the only way to secure a confession in public from Quain was to bring him to the gallows; and as he had not forgotten the recent attempt on his own life, he went to the jail with vengeance at the front.

He told how Bullet Head had murdered Tony while the latter slept and the jury unanimously pronounced the prisoner guilty, after which Judge Pease sentenced him to be hanged the following morning at sunrise.

Bullet Head made several attempts to speak during this so-called trial, but he was not allowed to say anything. Why should a man defend himself where proof was so strong? The men of Red Bullet Bar demanded.

On the whole, he took matters very quietly, and as the jail was miserably lighted no one could assert that his eyes wavered for a moment. They could not have told if he shed tears.

Well satisfied with the result, Allen went away to get a little sleep after securing Wood's promise that he should have the last hour of the condemned in the shape of an interview.

At that moment Edmund Bartlett lay on a bed in his house with a doctor and a whole brigade of nurses at his bedside. The doctor had worked diligently, but his patient had not seen a conscious moment since he was brought out of the vault, and in spite of all medicines he had gone from one fit into another with alarming frequency.

The miserable man was suffering from the judgment of time, which often works where man's vengeance is passive or lifeless.

Lila remained at his bedside and did all in her power. There had never been much sympathy between them, and of late Bartlett had become positively cruel to her, but she believed him her father and gave the care, if not the respect, she believed due him.

Toward morning he opened his eyes, after lying some time quiet, with a rational light in them, but at the sight of Lila, close beside him, he at once became excited.

"Take her away!" he cried, pointing to the girl.

"Take her away. I won't have her here; she looks like him!"

"Have no fear; all is well," the physician soothingly said. "This is your daughter, Lila. Don't you know her?"

"She's no daughter of mine!" almost shouted the mine-owner. "She's his daughter and I hate her. Take her away; I won't have her here."

"But, father—" pleaded Lila.

"I'm no father of yours, and I wonder why I ever called myself so. You're his daughter and you want to get my money. But you sha'n't have it; I'll drive you out; I'll have you put out of the way. Where's Ki Lee? Tell him to bring me some poison. Send Crisp here!"

In this way the miserable wretch rambled on until the doctor was obliged to send Lila away. The man of medicine, whatever his real opinion, pronounced all these ravings "imaginings of a disordered mind," but when he came to talk of the death-vault there was less room for unbelief.

He imagined he was again confined with the skeletons and that they were menacing and trying to strangle him. Even the doctor shivered at his ideas, but it was not until he sunk into a drugged slumber that his tell-tale tongue became quiet.

Then, science had achieved an advantage, but the chances of saving his life were very small indeed.

The night passed, and at the appointed hour Allen went to the jail to see Bullet Head once more before the latter was led out to suffer the penalty of his crimes. All arrangements had been made by which a confession could be put upon paper and legally witnessed, in case the Bravo could be persuaded to talk.

Allen found him seated at one side of his cell, grave but calm. His heavy beard had been shaved off before the expedition of the previous night, changing his appearance a good deal, but it gave an

additional look of firmness to his face and rather improved him if the dim light were not deceptive.

The two men looked steadily at each other.

"Have you come to bid me farewell?" Bullet Head asked with strange gentleness.

"I have come to ask for justice," Allen gravely answered.

"I wish it was in my power to do you justice."

"You can tell the world the true facts in regard to my parentage," was the eager reply.

"Alas! I do not even know the facts."

His voice was the same as before—calm, grave, sad and gentle; but Allen grew vexed at what he deemed his perverseness.

"You said when at the cave, that you did know; that I was the son of Robert Sinclair."

"I—I, Bullet Head, said this?"

"You did, as I will swear."

The gaze of the prisoner swept over the eager young face before him, noting each feature closely, and his own face began to tremble.

"It is so; I am sure it is so," he said in a husky voice.

"You know it is so, you have once declared it. Speak again, now, and proclaim it throughout all Red Bar. I am the son of an outraged and honorable man, whose name is under a cloud, and I call on you to clear it. Sir, I call on you for justice!"

Allen spoke in thrilling tones and the prisoner arose and held his clasped hands upward.

"Ay, justice, justice!" he hoarsely echoed. "Merciful Heaven, hear my prayer: Grant justice to Robert Sinclair and his son!"

His fervor deeply impressed Allen, who might otherwise have believed him a mocker.

"Useless, sir, as far as Robert Sinclair is concerned, for he is dead. It is not too late, however, to—"

"Too late! Yes, 'tis too late for Robert Sinclair, and yet he is not dead. He lives!"

Allen started forward and agitatedly grasped his arm.

"What?" he exclaimed. "What do you say? Dare you assert that Robert Sinclair lives?"

"He lives!" Bullet Head reiterated.

"Where is he?"

The Bravo folded his arms across his broad breast.

"He is here!" he deeply answered.

"Here?"

"Here, for I am he! Young man—Allen—I am Robert Sinclair—I am your father!"

CHAPTER XL.

THE HOUR OF DOOM!

THERE are moments in our lives when an assertion, falling upon our ears, impresses us being irrefrably true, and so it was with Allen when Bullet Head declared that he was at once Robert Sinclair and his father.

Yet, the younger man reeled back as though he had received a heavy blow.

If this was true, if the prisoner was Robert Sinclair, he had given testimony which was about to send his own father to the gallows!

One moment the room grew dark before the young man and then he brushed his hands vehemently across his eyes and again grasped his companion's arm.

"But—but—Bullet Head—" he stammered.

"Have you not guessed the truth? There have been two Bullet Heads; one, your father, who was your friend even when he did not suspect your identity, and the other the real Bullet Head, who is Tom Quain, and from whom you have experienced all your troubles. I am Robert Sinclair!"

At the last words the speaker opened his arms, and a moment later he held his own son therein, for the first time in twenty years.

Allen, however, could not forget the gallows that stood outside, and he suddenly started back from that embrace as from a nightmare.

"I must go," he declared. "Sheriff Wood—the people; I must explain to them—"

"They will not listen. Had they done that at my trial, I would have said, 'I am not Bullet Head,' but they would not hear me and they will not hear you. I must abide by the character I assumed—"

"They shall hear me; I swear it!"

Allen wheeled and started for the door, but before he could reach it others had opened it and Sheriff Wood and his men entered.

"All ready, my gay Bullet Head!" Wood jocularly said.

"He is not Bullet Head; there is a mistake," said Allen, breathlessly.

A jeer arose from the men.

"Does he go back on what he said last night? Never mind him—drag out the prisoner!"

The impatient crowd outside echoed the cry.

"Drag him out!"

Allen sprung before the men, mad because they would not listen, but they were equally angry because a stranger dared lift his voice in Red Bullet Bar. There was a brief, confused struggle, and then Allen lay senseless on the floor.

The lips of the prisoner quivered for a moment; then, flinging back his captors, he strode out between them and toward the place of execution with a firm step and erect head.

"What does it matter?" he muttered. "Life has always been my bitterest foe. Now's the time to get rid of it."

He went amid the hooting of the mob. No use to try to address them. Right or wrong, they had their way and nothing could move them. If the prisoner had been an eminent member of Congress he would not have been allowed even the five minutes' speech which he had often deemed an injustice.

It was the creed of Red Bullet Bar to hoot and yell and go ahead in a wild, unreasoning way, right or wrong.

for one thing he who made it would have swung from the same gibbet with the man he would have saved.

Before the tigers of the Bar could raise their voices afresh, a less angry one came on the heels of what Allen had said,

"Puffectly fit an' proper, an' hyar am I ter stan' by ye. Let ther red slayer slay ef he will, but Wicked William raises his peep fur jestice!"

"I aim ter be right," added a second voice; "but ef I may sound my warble I'd say I'm in ther game ter stay till ther alley is bowled clean!"

And Gentle John put his back to that of his partner, and each man bristled with weapons.

Luckily, there was a third behind them, and he the mayor of Red Bullet Bar. He raised his hands and shouted, and thus the fold of peace still hung over the hanging-party.

"Hold, my friends!" cried the mayor, "for there is a great mistake afoot. This man is not Bullet Head. The real Bravo lies dying in the hotel, to which he was brought by Wicked William and Gentle John, who captured and took him from his cave. Hold hard, all, and we'll straighten out the kinks in the skein."

And then Allen cut the rope which hung about his father's neck, Wicked William and his friends began a war-dance and the men of the Bar rushed and fro in pursuit of information.

Things were decidedly mixed, but Gentle John whispered in Allen's ear that Rose Jackson was safe at the hotel and it began to look as though the sky was clearing.

The mayor clung tightly to Allen, because the Bravo, who was mortally wounded, had asked to see him, and father and son went in that direction, accompanied by several friends.

Bullet Head burst into a laugh as he saw Allen and the rescued prisoner together.

"Well, I swear that looks sociable," he said, with shocking levity. "The prodigal son has come home, eh, old man? Well, sit down, all of you. I'm going down death's river with all sail set, and as I don't leave an heir who can profit by my silence, I'll tell all I know and knock Edmund Bartlett out of time. I hate that man worse than the devil does holy water."

"My name's Tom Quain. Twenty years ago old Reginald Sinclair was murdered. Who did it? People said 'twas his nephew, Robert. They lied. Another heir, who was named Edmund Bartlett, did the deed; I saw him strike the blow. Put that in writing; I'll swear to and sign it."

The confession was put in a more detailed form, and then Quain went on to tell how Bartlett had hired him to throw Robert's infant son into the Mississippi, but how he had brought it to his own home. He had schemes in view, but the additional trouble he had with the police obliged him to flee from St. Louis. This child, he added, had been reared as Allen Quain, and was the young man before him.

This statement was sworn to, and then the dying man went on to tell of the days of the two Bullet Heads.

After the murder of Reginald Sinclair, Robert was persuaded to flee to a foreign land by Bartlett, and during all the years that ensued the usurper kept him furnished with money, but took good care to keep him away from America.

Finally, Robert tired of it, and resolved to return. He did so, and came as soon as possible to Red Bullet Bar. On his arrival he met Bullet Head, as related in our second chapter, and their conversation resulted in showing the Bravo, or Thomas Quain, that the wronged Robert was back in America, while the latter, who called himself Bel-ford, stated that he not only feared the law, but mistrusted Bartlett's good faith.

Bullet Head felt a momentary regret that he had aided to ruin Robert's life, and under the impulse of the moment he suggested that they *exchange identities*. The Quixotic idea was carried out, and before they separated for the night the Bravo had given his companion every possible detail about his cave, and men to carry out his part of the plan.

They separated, but in the morning the false Bullet Head found that his ally, who had slept in his room, had strangely disappeared. Where had he gone?

The reader who has followed the history of the iron vault can tell, and we need only to remind him that the abduction took place in the night and without a light to show why Bartlett did not discover he had the wrong man.

Bullet Head had been tossed into the vault with Albert Leverett. At first they had no confidence in each other but after a little time they set to work to escape as brave men will.

They accomplished their work in a singularly simple manner. Leverett was once attached to a circus and was remarkably skillful in balancing. It did not take his active mind long to see hope in the long-handled paint-brush he had brought to do the last piece of work for Bartlett.

Having explained the plan to Bullet Head, the latter endeavored to raise him on the paint-brush until he could reach the combination-lock above and open the way for their escape. Uncouth as was the means, the plan was simple enough, and two experienced circus-performers would have succeeded at the first trial.

Bullet Head lacked experience and they scored several failures, but it succeeded at last. The two men left death-vault, and, securing it behind them, left the house.

After some consultation they resolved not to reveal themselves to any one for some time, but to watch proceedings from ambush, as it were. Leverett assumed a disguise and became the man "Ned," whom we met during the stage adventure and at other times.

In the mean while, Robert Sinclair had stepped into Bullet Head's place and was discharging the duties of the office. The Bravo, it will be remembered, had always worn a mask, their forms were alike and Robert imitated his voice.

He felt sure the real Bullet Head had fallen into Bartlett's clutches and tried to find him, as the reader will remember, but he did not suspect the existence of the death-vault.

The arrival of Allen on the scene set matters going with a fresh impetus, and as the true Bullet Head began to appear now and then in his real character,

there were two Bravos on the scene and matters became mixed.

The seeming discrepancies in the robber chief's character were due to the fact that the real robber was first encountered and then the false one. One was the friend of Allen; the other his enemy. One wished to help him on in his work; the other wished to baffle him. One gave him shelter in sincerity; the other sought his life.

It was the counterfeit Bullet Head, or Robert Sinclair, who first abducted Lila, in order to gain a hold on her father, and who nearly killed her while walking in his sleep; it was he who captured Allen and Blenker in the moonlit gulch; it was he who nearly hung Bartlett at Red Grove and who saved Allen and Blenker from a similar fate when they were under a ban at the Bar, and, as we have seen, he who found the skeletons in the death-vault.

On the other hand, it was the real Bravo who twice attempted the lives of Allen and Blenker, who surprised Bartlett when the latter would have conveyed the poison to Crisp, and who murdered Tony Wells and threw Bartlett in with the skeletons.

The two men, working at the same time, confused even themselves, at times, though at the last they were often together for hours.

We may also add that it was the real Bullet Head who placed the skeletons, which he found somewhere, in the vault to cause Bartlett to think his prisoners had died.

The moaning one night heard in the house by Allen and Blenker was not that of dying men, but of Foolish Joe in an uneasy sleep.

The latter had long been Bartlett's favorite tool. Indolent to a remarkable degree he was content to act the fool and cripple to avoid labor; but amid all he rather fancied Lila, and when he saw her meet two men at Red Grove he told no tales.

It will be remembered that Allen followed one of these men to the mountains. This was the real Bullet Head. The other was Albert Leverett, who was just notifying Lila, who was his betrothed, of his safety.

All these things had been made known when a messenger came to say that Edmund Bartlett was dying and that he, too, had a confession to make and wanted respectable witnesses.

He told the same story of the death of Reginald Sinclair that Quain had given, but he went further in one respect.

When Robert Sinclair fled after the death of his uncle, Bartlett had prevailed on Robert's wife to im-mure herself in a lonely house to "keep suspicion away from her husband," as Bartlett expressed it.

There she gave birth to a second child, a daughter, but died a few hours later. She was buried under the name of "Mrs. Smith," as Garland once told Allen.

Some strange impulse caused Bartlett to retain the girl-baby and rear it as his own. It lived to become the Lila of our story and was the lawful daughter of Robert and, of course, Allen's sister.

Two days later, when the Red Bar stage started for Beaver City, Robert Sinclair, Blenker, Allen, Albert Leverett, Eben Garland, Mrs. Quain, Rose and Lila went as passengers.

Garland was a prisoner, but he was to be released at St. Louis on condition that he made a confession of his share in the tragedy of old and then left the city.

Edmund Bartlett and Thomas Quain had that day been buried. The usurper had lost all for which he had sinned and Bullet Head would be seen no more around Red Bullet Bar. The outlaws' cave, too, was deserted.

Hester Ware, Foolish Joe and Bartlett's surviving Chinamen had disappeared silently and completely.

Thus, when the stage rolled away, its occupants knew their troubles were over; they were in the wondrous light of peace.

Wicked William and Gentle John silently watched the stage recede. Then they turned to each other.

"I aim ter be right," said John, "but I reckon my usefulness in Colorado is past. Way out in Nevada a durnation leetle Chinaman, named Bad Lung, waits fur me. I reckon I'll crawl toward ther Accident. I propose we amble on tergether an' set 'em up ag'in. What say?"

"Puffectly fit an' proper. Cut-throats ain't needed hyar any longer. We'll go. Fust, how's'er, let's sample ther ole man's fire-water."

"I yield ter your s'perior wisdom. We'll go in."

And they went.

In St. Louis, all our friends are happy. Allen and Leverett have married the women of their choice and the Sinclair wealth is no longer in vandal hands. Thus the drama closes.

THE END.

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